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WILLIAM SHAW

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INHERIT MY HEART



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Mary Burchell

He had left her penniless. After years of supporting his distant relatives, Uncle Enoch left them only small annuity - hardly enough for Naomi's extravagant mother. Naomi had no choice but to accept the invitation from Uncle Enoch's heir, Jerome Fennell, to discuss their plight. It was a shock to Naomi and her mother when the fortune they expected to inherit had been left to someone else. Naomi's mother that that Jerome and Naomi would get married but Naomi loved Jerome's brother (who was poor) instead.

CHAPTER ONE

"GOOD evening, Miss Thurrock," said Eamonn Andrews. "THIS IS YOUR LIFE!"

For a moment it seemed to Naomi that she stood, tiptoed, before some immense discovery, while excitement, amazement and sheer curiosity poured over her like a wave. Then the wave retreated, Eamonn Andrews faded before her eyes, and she woke to find herself staring sleepily at the streak of pale February sunshine which fell across the worn carpet of her little bedroom.

"Oh, I *wish* it could have gone on!" she exclaimed aloud, in mingled amusement and disappointment. But then she remembered that the famous television program dealt only with one's past, and what Naomi wanted to know was the future. The immediate future if possible.

She had been contemplating it with both dread and excitement ever since the arrival of those two letters yesterday morning. The one which had brought the disastrous news of Uncle Enoch Tenderleigh's will and—the other one.

Naomi simply could not remember a time when Uncle Enoch Tenderleigh had not loomed large in her life. For, though she had seldom seen him, the fact was that on him depended almost everything which made life possible in the small but pleasant house where she and her mother lived.

Once or twice during her childhood, and again on her sixteenth birthday, she had been taken to see him, in his splendid but gloomy mansion in one of the less attractive parts of the Fen District. And each time she had come away with an awesome impression of a singularly disagreeable old man, in a maroon-colored smoking jacket and an ornate tasselled cap, who asked

pointed questions about her schooling and general conduct, and cried, "Nonsense, nonsense!

the child's a fool!" in reply to almost anything which she herself vouchsafed in the way of conversation.

Though one owed much to Uncle Enoch Tenderleigh, one could not possibly love him. As soon might one love the Eiffel Tower or the Battersea Power station. More easily in fact, for presumably interest attached to the one and warmth emanated from the other, whereas with Uncle Enoch neither warmth nor interest could be associated.

On the other hand, when Naomi's father had died—fecklessly and inconsiderately, Uncle Enoch had implied on the one occasion he referred to the incident in Naomi's hearing—it was the disgruntled old gentleman who had taken upon himself the responsibility of providing for the five-year-old Naomi and her charming but unpractical mother.

"It was very, very good of him, of course," Mrs. Thurrock used to say, when trying—not very successfully—to do justice to Uncle Enoch. "For, after all, I'm no real relation of his, and even your father was only a remote sort of cousin of his first wife. But then he *is* so immensely wealthy that he can't really miss the little he allows us."

Whether he missed it or not, Uncle Enoch always accompanied the quarterly allowance with a letter about the necessity for strict economy and what he called simple living.

Naomi's mother was not all economical by nature, and simple living held no attractions for her. Consequently, instead of giving ear (or, in this case, eye) to Uncle Enoch's homilies, she used to shrug her shoulders, pay off the more pressing bills, and buy

herself and/or Naomi a new hat, coat or dress, secure in the knowledge that one day even Uncle Enoch must die and, according to repeated promises dangled temptingly before her, leave the bulk of his fortune to her and her daughter.

"There's no one else to whom he *could* leave it," she declared, when Naomi had recently queried the wisdom of relying quite so confidently on the statements of a capricious old man. "Besides, he promised me more than once. He said he couldn't afford to do much for us during his lifetime (such nonsense!), but that on his death he would see we were properly provided for. He's lived a very long time." Mrs. Thurrock sighed, though without malice because there was no malice in her. "Not many people live to be ninety-seven."

That, however, was the limit of Uncle Enoch Tenderleigh's achievement. Before he reached his ninety-eighth birthday he died in his sleep. And Mrs. Thurrock and Naomi would not have been human if they had not awaited with some excitement the news of whatever change this might make in their lives.

Naomi was eighteen by now and had just left school. Her own practical inclination had been to go on almost immediately to a good secretarial college. But her mother declared that, since Uncle Enoch could not possibly live much longer and would undoubtedly leave them in a state of affluence, such a training would be a waste of time and money.

Unrealistic though Naomi felt this to be, it was perhaps natural at eighteen to waver in one's resolution to work for work's sake. And, while she hesitated, the momentous news of Uncle Enoch's death arrived.

A severe attack of 'flu prevented Mrs. Thurrock from attending the funeral and, since someone had to stay and nurse her, there was no question of Naomi's going either. Both were genuinely sorry, for it was much easier to like Uncle Enoch now that he was no longer there, and they would willingly have paid some form of grateful respect to the man who had helped them (though grudgingly) during his lifetime and promised to make them rich on his death.

But 'flu is not something with which one can argue. So they both remained at home, in the quiet south coast town where they lived, and awaited the letter from Uncle Enoch Tenderleigh's lawyers which would tell them the extent of their new fortune.

The previous morning the letter had come. Even now Naomi winced at the recollection. It was short, but alas, it was absolutely explicit. To Naomi's mother Uncle Enoch had left an annuity of two hundred pounds. To Naomi he left the sum of fifty pounds and the salutary advice to work hard and maintain herself in diligence and self-respect, as in this state she would be much happier than if maintained in idleness.

Whatever basic truth there might be in this posthumous brush-off, this had not been the moment to discern it. Naomi, as well as her mother, had been stunned by the news.

"But who could have *got* it all?" cried Mrs. Thurrock distractedly. "There must have been a hundred thousand pounds, if there was a penny. And we were the only relations he had."

"Perhaps we weren't," Naomi said doubtfully. "Perhaps his second wife had some relations."

"But only relations by marriage." Mrs. Thurrock no longer remembered that her own claim came into this category. "Anyway,

the marriage only lasted three years and then she died, poor thing. I don't wonder!"

"Then perhaps he left it to charity," Naomi suggested.

"He wasn't charitable," replied her mother, with simple conviction. "Oh, Naomi, what *shall* we do?"

Naomi really didn't know at that moment. She regarded her mother across the table with wide, troubled eyes—almost violet blue eyes, which were about all she had inherited from her charming artist father.

"I suppose," she said at last, "we must just be thankful for what we have. Lots of people would be mad with joy at being left an annuity of two hundred pounds."

"Not if they had been led to expect a fortune," retorted Mrs. Thurrock with truth. And, as the golden dreams of a lifetime collapsed in the grey ashes of disillusionment, she could not keep back the angry, disappointed tears.

"Oh, Mother, don't cry!" Jumping up, Naomi came round the table to hug her consolingly. "I'll use my fifty pounds to train for a good job. And with your annuity and my salary we'll manage very well. I know it's disappointing. But it could have been worse—"

"*How* could it have been worse?" her mother broke in pettishly.

"He could have left you nothing—and me no good advice," Naomi said, with a gleam of humor. "Look at your other letters, Mother. There may be some explanation in one of them.

"They'll only be bills." Mrs. Thurrock turned over the other few envelopes disconsolately. Then she straightened up and stopped

crying. For the last envelope was a thick, expensive-looking one, bearing on the flap, in discreetly tasteful black lettering, the address, Foley Grange, Pentaton.

"Foley Grange? Whom do I know at Foley Grange?—or any other Grange, come to that." Unquenchable optimism and an almost childlike capacity for interest had already brought a faint smile to her lips.

"Open it and see," suggested Naomi, glad of even so small a distraction at this sad moment. And— while Mrs. Thurrock slit open the envelope and drew out several sheets of the same expensive-looking stationery, on which someone had written a good deal, in clear, decisive handwriting—Naomi went back to her seat and poured herself a cup of coffee. She felt she needed it.

For a few minutes there was silence in the room. Then Mrs. Thurrock, still reading, murmured, "How extraordinary."

"What is, Mother?"

"Guilty conscience, of course! They must have worked on the old man in those last months. Otherwise, why write now?"

"Who has written?" Naomi's interest was thoroughly aroused.

"It's horribly condescending—" Mrs. Thurrock made a slight face as she turned the last sheet. "But it could make all the difference if—"

"Mother, *what* could make all the difference?" Naomi was beside herself with curiosity by now.

"This letter." Her mother gave the offending sheets a slight, scornful slap with her free hand. "You were right, Naomi. It *was*

the second wife's relations. They got most of the fortune, according to this letter from—" she looked at the end again—"from Cecilia Courteney. (What a ridiculous name! So pretentious. Like someone in a book.) *Mrs.* Cecilia Courteney she must be, because she says that she and her son are the chief beneficiaries. Imagine it! Uncle Enoch could hardly have known them. And they got practically all of it."

"Does she say that too?" Naomi was intrigued.

"Not in so many words. But she implies it. It seems the lawyers told her about us. She says about you, but I suppose she means both of us." *Mrs.* Thurrock remarked in parenthesis. "She 'understands we were led to expect something much more substantial.' How right! And she says she wants to see you. She *does* only say you." Reluctantly, Naomi's mother digested that fact. "I wonder why only you?"

"Perhaps," suggested Naomi diffidently, "she feels I'm the actual relation, even though a remote one."

"Very likely. I hadn't thought of that. Will you mind?"

"Mind, Mother? Why should I mind?"

"Well, going to stay at this place—this Foley Grange—all on your own."

"She wants me to *stay* there?" Naomi was startled, though not unpleasantly so. "How does she put it? May I see the letter?"

"Of course." Her mother handed it over and fell silent, while Naomi perused the firm lines of *Mrs.* Courteney's letter.

It was much as her mother had said. Obviously Mrs. Courteney and her son had inherited the bulk of Uncle Enoch's fortune—rightly or wrongly. And although there was absolutely no actual mention of moral claims, the implication was that perhaps Naomi's situation merited investigation.

The letter was cautious rather than generous, but at least it contained the suggestion that Naomi should visit her relations—"very remote ones, of course," Mrs. Courteney added, evidently wishing to make that quite clear. "And perhaps if we like each other, we might come to some arrangement by which Naomi would not feel that she had been too hardly treated."

"What does she mean, do you suppose?" Naomi asked her mother.

"Probably nothing," replied Mrs. Thurrock, with an unusual degree of realism. "But we can't afford to ignore it."

"Can't we?"

"Why, Naomi, of course not!" Her mother whirled round to look at her, for when that note entered Naomi's usually soft voice, it could presage a display of peculiar obstinacy.

"I think it's a horrid letter," Naomi stated. "It's a letter which emphasises to the last degree the fact that she had everything but that we might get a crumb or two if we give satisfaction."

"At least she implies they *might* do something."

"And that's what makes it so nasty," Naomi declared. "Either she thinks we've been shabbily treated or she doesn't. If she does think so, she could redress the balance without concocting a sort of visit on approval. If she doesn't, it would have been more dignified to ignore us."

"I suppose she wants to—to—inspect you and decide if she likes you well enough to help you."

"Well, do you call that a nice or generous attitude?" asked Naomi indignantly.

"It may not be nice or generous," Mrs. Thurrock admitted with a slight smile. "But it's very human. Few people can resist the temptation to display their power—even when it comes to giving. Still, you will go, won't you, Naomi? It's the only chance we have of perhaps retrieving a ghastly position."

"If you think I should—" Naomi began.

"Of course you should! The situation's full of possibilities." The new turn of events had already set Naomi's mother on a line of optimistic speculation. "Mrs. Courteney might take a great fancy to you and decide to do the right thing by you in a big way. Or there is the son—"

She paused and reached for the letter once more.

"Yes—of course—there is the son. He may be much nicer than the mother, Naomi. It may be *he* who persuaded her to write. She doesn't sound like a woman who would make this offer on her own behalf, now I come to think of it. More like someone falling in reluctantly with another's wishes. You know, I think that's it!" Mrs. Thurrock was quite enchanted by this new idea. "It's the *son* who feels justice should be done. He must be generous if he reacts that way. Why, you and he might like each other on sight—"

"Or think each other poisonous," Naomi countered cheerfully. "And he may not be generous at all, Mother. She may have had a frightful row with him before she could get this letter written. He said, 'Leave them alone. Don't give them ideas, or goodness only

knows what they'll expect.' Only she insisted. You see! I can romance just as well as you."

"I don't think that's a nice thing to say." Mrs. Thurrock looked reproachful. "I'm only trying to assess the situation intelligently—to find some silver lining to this dreadful cloud."

"I know!" Naomi was immediately remorseful. "I'm sorry."

"And you'll go, won't you, Naomi? How I wish I could come too!"

"So do I! I think it's significantly horrid and ungenerous of Mrs. C. C. not to have asked us both."

"Well—" her mother sighed—"it can't be helped. You must just do your best, Naomi. *Please* do your best."

At the time, Naomi had earnestly undertaken to "do her best." Though quite what this meant she was now not very sure.

As she got up and dressed, she allowed her mind to run over the next — faintly embarrassing development. For, instead of writing, her impulsive mother had immediately (and rather expensively) telephoned to Mrs. Courteney.

Judging from what she could hear from one end of the conversation only, Naomi uneasily felt that it had not been well handled. For her mother had an extremely revealing speaking voice and, to Naomi's ears at any rate, both anxiety and resentment sounded quite clearly below the surface of her tone of polite amiability.

Mrs. Thurrock, however, was not dissatisfied. She came away from the telephone flushed, agitated but, on balance, triumphant.

"I don't know how often that dreadful thing pipped," she exclaimed. "But at least everything is settled. You are to go there on Friday, Naomi, by the three-twenty from King's Cross, and she says her son will meet you at Pentaton about five. That's not a bad opening." Mrs. Thurrock looked pensive "The son—he's called Martin—will meet you, and—"

"Never mind about him now, Mother." Naomi firmly but good-humoredly put a stop to any more speculation on that line. "What did she sound like"?

"As though she's never made an endearing social error in her life," replied Mrs. Thurrock promptly, "A sweet but rather chilling voice."

"Like ice-cream?" Naomi suggested.

"Not common or garden ice-cream. More like something made to special order, from Fortnum & Mason's."

"I—see," said Naomi. And, not for the first time, she thought what a curious mixture of shrewdness and foolishness her very dear mother was.

During the next few days Mrs. Thurrock veered between wildly optimistic romancing on the possible outcome of the visit and a certain degree of depression about Mrs. Courteney and her motives.

Naomi, on her part, concentrated on seeing that as few extravagant gestures as possible were made with regard to her outfit for the momentous visit.

Not that she was any less interested in clothes than any other normal girl. But, with their finances at such a low ebb, and any

improvement in them problematical, she felt she must rely on her existing wardrobe and her own charms for any impression she might hope to make on the occupants of Foley Grange.

This was the easier to accept since her clothes, though few, were good, unpretentious and becoming. For all her foolishness and extravagance, Mrs. Thurrock had innate good taste, and this she had passed on to her daughter.

In addition, Naomi was not difficult to dress, since she had a good figure and, along with the violet-blue eyes, Nature had generously endowed her with very pretty, slightly curling dark hair and that smooth, creamy skin which looks almost luminously delicate but is, in fact, gratifyingly tough and requires almost no care or cosmetics.

When the great day came, Mrs. Thurrock insisted on accompanying Naomi to London and seeing her on to her train at King's Cross. Most of the way she kept up a show of courageous good spirits which secretly excited Naomi's admiration. But, at the last minute, just before the train whistle blew, she flung her arms round her child and exclaimed,

"Try to make something of it, Naomi. I don't know what we're to do if you don't. It isn't only a question of the fearful disappointment. One could have borne that, I suppose. But—there are debts. Much bigger and more frightening debts than I've ever dared to tell you."

"But, Mother—" Suddenly scared, Naomi wished this vital piece of information had not been withheld until a moment too late for amplification— "How come? You never said—"

"No, of course not. Why should I worry a child like you? Besides, everything was going to be all right when Uncle Enoch died," Mrs. Thurrock pointed out, with naive wistfulness. "But now—"

"Close the doors, please! Close the doors!" shouted a porter, as he passed along the platform. And Naomi sprang into the train, slammed the door and leaned from the open window.

"How much, Mother?" There was no time for niceties of expression now. Only for grim essentials. But even these were denied her. "I don't know—quite." Her mother looked curiously helpless and bleak as she lifted her pale, anxious face to Naomi. "Only far more than we could ever pay ourselves. Just do your best, dear."

"I will, I will," Naomi promised, again vaguely troubled by the thought that she had still no idea what this entailed.

"And—concentrate on the son, darling," cried Mrs. Thurrock, as the train began to move. "I feel in my bones that *she's* not going to be much help. Concentrate on *him*".

"I will," Naomi promised again, as the train bore her away out of earshot. Then she pulled up the window and turned to go along the corridor to her compartment. As she did so, she almost cannoned into a girl, a few years older than herself, who was standing immediately behind her.

"I'm so sorry—"

"Not at all." The other girl pulled up the collar of her sable jacket and shivered slightly in the draught which blew along the corridor. But she smiled in an amused way, which suggested that she had heard a good deal of the conversation just cut short.

Naomi flushed.

"I hope you weren't trying to speak to someone while I was hogging the whole window," she said apologetically.

"No. I was just going to ask a porter about arrival times, but it doesn't matter. Anyway—" the other girl laughed teasingly—"I gather your conversation was a lot more important than anything I had to say."

"Oh—" Naomi flushed again. But the other girl continued to look curious and amused, so she laughed and said candidly, "It must have sounded awful. But I'm the poor relation going to visit unknown rich ones. I feel a bit like Cinderella—without benefit of a godmother."

"But Cinderella got her man, didn't she?" the other girl retorted succinctly. Then, with a slight nod, she turned in the direction of the first-class compartments.

Naomi, faintly shocked to think she had been so frank to a complete stranger, found her way to her own compartment, and here she sat in her corner seat, reading the headlines of her newspaper without really taking in their meaning. Then, abandoning this, she stared out of the window and began to take stock of her situation.

Until this moment, when she was quite alone, she had not really faced up to the experience ahead. She realized that now. She had been too much occupied with details of departure, the necessity of keeping her mother's flights of fancy within bounds, and the effort of maintaining courage and good spirits in a rather tricky situation.

Now, as the smoke-blackened environs of King's Cross began to give place to rows of depressing-looking houses and then patches

of more open country, Naomi passed the full facts of their position in realistic review.

That her mother had not been able to give that the actual sum total of their debts might be due either to a real inability to assess them or to a terrified refusal to face the truth even now. In either case, the situation was disquieting in the extreme, and Naomi bit her lip as she thought of the final glimpse of her mother's pathetic, worried expression.

In the ordinary way, she would have felt confident of earning her own living and, to a certain extent, supporting her mother too. Not in the golden circumstances dictated by the Uncle Enoch myth, of course, but in modest decency. But now the picture was radically changed by her mother's last hurried admission.

"Poor Mother!" Naomi thought. "She's relying on me to get her out of a pretty ghastly hole. And for her sake I'll *have* to make the best impression I can, even if Mrs. Courteney is a bit patronizing.. Somehow I think I shall do better with her than with the son. Mother can feel what she likes in *her* bones!—" Naomi smiled irrepressibly as she recalled her mother's final heart-cry—"my bones tell me that the Courteney son is going to be a dead loss in all this."

But that was before she met Martin Courteney.

He was waiting for her, on the small, open, windblown platform, when the train drew in, and her first sight of him was in the uncertain light of the old-fashioned station lamps. Even so, he looked like something out of a Norse saga. Tall, fair and powerfully built, with curiously light, laughing blue eyes in a tanned face. (How did he manage that tan—in England in February? she wondered.)

As she stepped out of the train, he came towards her, smiling, and took her luggage from her.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Martin Courteney, and you must be Naomi."

"Yes. How nice of you to come to meet me." And, looking at him, she had the odd idea that she understood why Uncle Enoch had left him his money. To a tired, cross, bored old man this smiling vital creature must have been fascinating. Like light and fresh air suddenly flooding into that gloomy house in the Fenland.

He made conventional enquiries about her journey on their way out of the station. But, once she was settled beside him in the front seat of the car, he turned to her and said.

"I don't see how even Uncle Enoch could have brushed off anything as attractive as you."

"Oh—thank you." Naomi laughed, surprised and gratified by this uninhibited tribute. "As a matter of fact, we hadn't met for two years and—"

"That must be it," Martin Courteney declared, as he started the car. "I hope you're going to enjoy staying with us, Naomi."

"I'm sure I am." Naomi found she could say that with conviction now. "It was very kind of your mother to invite me."

"Oh, well—" He left the sentence unfinished, a little as though the reasons for the invitation were self-evident, and Naomi decided that the impulse prompting the invitation probably *had* been the son's rather than the mother's.

"Are there just yourself and your mother living at Foley Grange?" she enquired as the car turned out of the station approach into a

winding country road, from which the last of the afternoon light was already fading.

"And Jerome, of course," he said, again as though Naomi were much better informed about the family and their actions than was in fact the case. "He spends about half his time with us. We're only half-brothers, of course. Mother married twice, as perhaps you know."

"No, I didn't know. Quite honestly, I'd never heard of any of you until your mother's letter arrived. The whole connection is very tenuous, isn't it? With Uncle Enoch as the only real link."

"I suppose you're right." He turned his head and smiled full at her, in a way that was little short of dazzling. "Accept that as the only explanation I can offer for not having made your acquaintance before."

Naomi laughed again, a little shyly, but with genuine pleasure in the discovery that this visit looked like being much less difficult than she had supposed.

The drive from the station was not long, and there was not time for much more conversation before they passed under the arch of a charming old gatehouse and along a smooth, well-kept path, to come to a halt before a much more imposing house than any Naomi had expected.

Foley Grange quite obviously dated back several hundred years, but it had been added to at later periods and there were signs of considerable, though discreet, restoration and modernization. All this was visible, in spite of the surrounding darkness, in the subdued but admirably placed floodlighting which gave point and significance to the really beautiful facade.

"Why, how *lovely!*" Naomi got out of the car and stood regarding the scene with unconcealed delight. "It's like something out of a history book—or on a stage."

"The stage effect is due to Jerome, of course," Martin Courteney said with a shrug, once more as though Naomi would naturally understand the implications of that. Then, leaving the luggage to a manservant, who had come out of a side door at the sound of the car, he led the way up to the big, nail-studded front door.

This admitted them into a stone passage, which gave on to a central hall of imposing proportions. Here, beside a really magnificent log fire, sat Mrs. Courteney.

Naomi would have known immediately that it was Mrs. Courteney, even if she had not expected to find her there. She was so exactly as Mrs. Thurrock had deduced from the telephone conversation.

Tall, elegant, and absolutely composed, she greeted Naomi with exact if rather chilling courtesy. Then, having asked all the right questions about her journey, she summoned the housekeeper, whom she introduced as Mrs. Sparks, and bade her show Naomi to her room.

It was difficult not to feel somewhat intimidated, as one was conducted up a wide, shallow staircase and along several passages, to a room which would have comfortably accommodated the whole of the ground floor of the house in which Naomi had lived all her life.

But Mrs. Sparks spoke pleasantly and kindly to her, and when she finally asked if there were anything else required, Naomi exclaimed, with naive delight, "It's the loveliest bedroom I've ever

seen! I don't see how anyone *could* want anything else in a place like this."

The housekeeper smiled then and said unexpectedly, "Contentment and luxury don't always go hand in hand, my lamb. But a good child like you will have learned that already, I don't doubt."

Naomi was a good deal startled by the unusual form of address. But her heart warmed inexpressibly to the undistinguished-looking grey-haired woman in the stiff black dress.

"How do you know I'm a good child?" she asked curiously. "I mean—what makes you think I am?"

"Your candid eyes and your innocent smile," replied the housekeeper. "Go downstairs when you are ready."

Then she went away, leaving Naomi wondering how Mrs. Courteney, of all people, had acquired—and, still more, retained—such an unusual woman in her household.

She washed her face and hands in the pink and grey bathroom which led out of her bedroom, brushed her dark hair until it settled in burnished waves round her graceful head, and changed into the deceptively simple black velvet dress for which her mother had paid a sum that would have appalled Uncle Enoch, had he known.

Then she went downstairs. That is to say, she started off to find her way downstairs. But the panelled passages looked very much alike, and suddenly she found herself at the foot of a few steps which she did not remember having seen when she came with Mrs. Sparks.

They led up to a room where the door was ajar, showing a streak of light. And, as Naomi paused, she heard a sound as though

someone scraped back a chair on the floor. Curiosity, and the demands of the occasion, overcame a certain degree of shyness and, mounting the stairs, she tapped on the door.

"Come in," a man's voice said absently. And Naomi pushed the door wider open and looked in on what was evidently something between a sitting-room and a studio.

There was only one person in the room, and he sat on a high stool before an easel and sketched in quick strong lines with a stick of charcoal. It seemed he had already made several attempts at what he wanted, for sheets of crumples paper were scattered over the floor.

Not that Naomi noticed this in the first moment. All she noticed at first was the man himself, as he sat there under the strong light, which accentuated every line of his thin, dark, slightly haggard face.

She never forgot that first sight of Jerome Fennell. Even years afterwards, she could recall exactly how he looked to her then. The good bone structure of his sensitive face, the firm yet faintly sensual line of his mouth, and the way his dark hair grew straight back from his forehead. He was not specially handsome, only, in some odd way, he was completely arresting. And she stood there, strangely fascinated, until he said, without looking up, "Either come in or go away. What do you want?"

"To know how to get downstairs," she replied, with a hint of laughter in her voice. And at that he looked up, and she saw that he had the same unusually blue eyes as his brother. Only in that dark, thin, face they were even more striking than in the smiling vital countenance of the younger brother.

"Hello," he said. "Who are you?"

"Naomi."

"Naomi? Oh, the Thurrock child." He put down his stick of charcoal, wiped his hand on a duster and held it out to her. "Come here and let me have a look at you."

She came slowly forward, intrigued rather than affronted by the command, and put her hand into his. It was a strong, well-shaped hand, she noticed, and his fingers held hers lightly but with an odd suggestion of power.

"So you're Naomi." His faintly mocking glance travelled over her, and she had the inescapable impression that he immediately knew a good deal about her. "You didn't take long to accept the invitation to Foley, did you?"

She remembered her mother's precipitate telephone call with shame, but she managed to say quite composedly, "My mother and your mother settled it between them."

"To be sure." There was a note of irony in his slight laugh. "How useful our mothers can be. Did you want to come, Naomi?"

"Yes, I think I did."

"Why?" he asked abruptly.

"Why? Partly out of curiosity and partly to please my mother, I think."

"And not at all with a view to financial gain, I suppose?" There was no mistaking the irony that time.

"You may not believe it, but, left to myself, I probably shouldn't have come," replied Naomi, forgetting all her good resolutions,

and speaking with the dry candour she thought he deserved. "I don't like to be patronized, and acceptance of the invitation rather invited that. Or so it seems," she added, looking straight at him.

She hardly knew whether she hoped to anger or abash him. In point of fact, she did neither. He looked back at her with sudden increased interest. And what he said was, "Why, your eyes are a real violet blue! I've heard of such things, but never seen them. Lord, but I wish I could paint that color! But it wouldn't look genuine on canvas—" he gave a slight shrug—"only in real life.—What was it you wanted to know? How to get downstairs? Go back down those steps and straight ahead until the passage divides. Turn sharp right and then second on the left. You'll see the stairs in front of you."

And he turned back to his easel with a finality which dismissed her more clearly than any words.

Naomi went. And, having followed his instructions carefully, she presently found herself downstairs in the great hall again, where Martin was lounging alone by the fire, drinking a whisky and soda.

"Come and have a drink." He pulled forward a chair for her and enquired after her tastes. And when she was sipping her excellent sherry, he said, "So you found your way down all right."

"I lost my way at first. But then I was redirected. By your brother, I think."

"Jerome? Was he walking around?" Martin seemed surprised about that. "Or did you find your way to his studio?"

"I stumbled on his studio by chance. You didn't tell me he was an artist."

"He's not." Again Martin Courteney looked surprised. "Not in the general sense of the term, I mean. He's a stage designer and producer. But surely you know his name?"

"I don't know much about these things," Naomi explained rather humbly. "I don't think I ever heard of the name Courteney in connection with the stage."

"But that's not his name. I told you—my mother married twice. Jerome is the son of the first marriage. He's Jerome Fennell.

"O-oh, yes. I've heard of him—of course. He's supposed to be very brilliant, isn't he?"

For some reason or other, this appeared to amuse Martin greatly.

"Yes, he's supposed to be," he agreed. "In fact, he is," he conceded with a grin. "It's not my line of country, but there's something about his work you can't ignore. It has star quality, in some indefinable way, and heaven knows that's rare enough in a mediocre world."

The praise came generously enough, but there was some overtone in the voice which made Naomi ask impulsively, "Don't you get on together?" Then she blushed for her naive curiosity. But Martin seemed quite unoffended.

"Not very well," he said frankly. And then his mother came in, and the conversation became less personal.

"We shan't be more than four for dinner tonight." Mrs. Courteney stood before the fire and held out her hands to the blaze. They were curiously reminiscent of her elder son's hands, Naomi thought—fine and well-shaped. But some odd fancy suggested to

her that the curve of the fingers was cruel, and Jerome Fennell's hands had not been cruel.

"I thought Antonia was coming," Martin said.

"She'll join us for coffee later. She rang up just now to say it had been a tiring day and she intended to rest before coming on here. Antonia Vayne is a near neighbor of ours," she explained to Naomi. "I thought you might like to meet someone nearer your own age. She's a very sweet girl."

"Oh, Mother, she wouldn't thank you for that description!" Martin's laughing protest cut across Naomi's words of suitable acknowledgement.

"Why not?" Mrs. Courteney looked mildly surprised. "She's a most attractive girl. Everyone says so."

"Attractive—yes. Not sweet."

"I think you're splitting hairs."

"*She* wouldn't." Martin laughed again. "As a sweet girl, she'd hardly feel she had much chance of catching Jerome. His tastes are sophisticated."

"You're being vulgar," his mother said coldly.

"But penetrating," retorted Martin good-humoredly. And he gave Naomi a graceless wink behind his mother's austere back.

Naomi, who was now facing Mrs. Courteney, tried not to smile too obviously. But it was difficult to resist the infectious gaiety of Martin's dancing eyes. He was, she decided, much the easiest of the three to get on with.

Jerome made no appearance before dinner. But when they were summoned to the dining room by the sound of a mellow gong, he was already there, standing behind his chair, with his hands on the back of it.

He inclined his head courteously to his mother, but it was Martin who moved out her chair for her, and Naomi felt a sudden conviction that Jerome was not his mother's favorite son.

Over dinner conversation was the formal kind which is inevitable between people who know each other only slightly. Jerome contributed little to it, and the chief burden fell on Martin, who seemed, however, well able to sustain it.

He talked with infectious good humor about himself, and gave a lively description of the winter sports he had recently attended.

"Oh, I wondered where you got that tan," Naomi said with a smile. "I felt it could hardly be here—in February."

"Martin is a very fine skater and a champion skier," observed his mother, as though conferring an accolade upon him.

"In fact, Martin is what's known as an all-round sportsman," stated Jerome, but not at all as though he were conferring any accolade upon him. More in a tone of mockery.

"I guessed as much." Naomi did not try to keep the touch of coolness out of her voice, for she saw no reason for the mockery. "I take it you don't go in for that sort of thing."

Immediately there was a strange little silence, as though everyone held their breath. Then he said coldly, "No. I'm a cripple."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Naomi went crimson.

"You have no need to be. It isn't your business."

She bit her lip, but was silent under this verbal slap in the face. It was Martin who exclaimed, "Do you have to be so offensive about it—or to exaggerate so much? A limp doesn't make one a cripple."

"It's a handicap when skating," was the dry rejoinder.

"All right. But you can do other things, can't you?"

"Of course." Jerome looked bored now, as though it were Martin who had precipitated this scene. "Why so hot about it?"

"I resent your being rude to a guest."

"I apologize, Naomi." His bright, mocking eyes met hers across the table, but they looked much darker now, and there was no smile in them.

"You have no need to," Naomi said quietly, using almost his own words. "I wasn't offended."

It was Mrs. Courteney who brought back the conversation to normal by saying, "I think I heard Antonia arrive. We'll go into the drawing room for coffee."

Chairs were pushed back and, stooping down, Jerome picked up a stick from the floor beside him. He looked perfectly cool about it, as he levered himself to his feet, with one hand on the table. But, by that curious extra sense which we all acquire at times, Naomi knew that he loathed having to do this in front of a stranger.

So she turned away immediately and went with Martin, and it was only later that she saw for herself how badly he did limp when he was tired.

Mrs. Courteney had gone on ahead of them and was already greeting her visitor when they entered the mellow, softly lit drawing room. There was a note of more genuine warmth in her voice than any Naomi had noticed so far. And then, as she turned to make the introductions, Naomi let out an audible gasp.

Antonia Vayne was the girl who had spoken to her on the train.

It was a moment of acute embarrassment and dismay, in which Naomi vainly strove to recall just how many indiscreet revelations had been made in front of this amused, impeccably dressed girl. Then Antonia said, "But we've already met—on the train from London. We actually spoke to each other, only I just didn't realize it was you Miss Thurrock was visiting."

A certain amount of laughing enquiry and explanation followed, in which Naomi somehow contrived to take a reasonable part. But, all the while she was thinking, "*Did*, she hear Mother say I must concentrate on the son? And why on earth did I make that ridiculous crack about feeling like Cinderella, visiting the rich relations? Suppose she tells them. Suppose she tells Martin about Mother's final advice! Only why should she? It's *Jerome* she's interested in. Martin said as much. Not that I'd like her to tell *him*. He'd slay one with contempt. But even that would be better than having Martin told. At least, I suppose it would be."

By some innate skill—which she had not until now discovered in herself—Naomi somehow managed to balance her attention between the social demands of conversation and the insistent nagging of her own agitated thoughts. But it was not an easy evening.

Fortunately, Antonia Vayne seemed inclined to devote most of her conversation to Jerome. They discussed stage matters—on a level

which suggested that she too had some connection with the theatre world—and more than once she made him laugh, in that slight, half reluctant way of his.

Meanwhile, Naomi ploughed along gallantly through a formal, rather heavy conversation with her hostess, with occasional careless help from Martin.

It was over at last, just as she was thinking she could not keep up the strain much longer. Antonia rose and said she must go, and Jerome went with her to the door to see her off.

"No doubt you'll be glad of an early night, after your journey," Mrs. Courteney observed, as she also got up from her chair.

But, before Naomi could agree, Martin exclaimed, "Nonsense. We have a dozen things to talk about yet. Don't you want to sit by the fire for half an hour longer?"

Naomi did—since this also seemed likely to include a little time with Martin on her own. So she said she would like that. And, having bade them both a cool goodnight, Mrs. Courteney went away, leaving them together.

Without knowing it, Naomi gave a long sigh of relief and relaxed in her chair.

Martin glanced across at her and laughed.

"I believe you are tired, after all," he said.

"No, I'm not! It was a bit of a strain, that's all."

"What was?"

"Oh—everything. Meeting strangers, coming to the kind of household I've never known in my life before—"

"And having Jerome jump down your throat like that, earlier in the evening," he suggested, frowning.

"No, I didn't mind that—really. I was just so sorry I'd hurt him."

"People shouldn't be so super-sensitive," Martin declared cheerfully. "Not when they have loads of compensations."

"Has he loads of compensations?"

"Well, of course. What would most people give to be rich and famous, as Jerome is?"

"I suppose—you're right," Naomi conceded. But she thought of the bleak expression in the eyes which had looked coldly at her across the dinner table. And, since Martin was so easy to talk to, she asked impulsively, "Is he in love with Antonia Vayne, do you think?"

"I have no idea."

"But you said—rather light-heartedly—that she was with him."

"Oh, surely not!" He laughed protestingly. "No, what I said was that she meant to catch him. Rather _a different thing."

"Not necessarily. She might want to do—just that because she did love him."

"She might." Martin looked sceptical. "But I'd say it was safer to bet on the money, rather than his blue eyes, as the main attraction."

"Is there a lot of money involved, then?" Naomi asked, for Antonia Wayne had not struck her as someone who had to consider these things very urgently, and Martin was very willing to talk, she saw.

"Of course. Who do you suppose owns and runs this place?"

"Well, I—hadn't thought about it. I assumed your mother did."

"Only in a very limited way. It was hers only if she didn't marry again. But she did marry—my father. He was like me. A charming chap, without a bean." And Martin grinned at her.

Naomi was so astounded at the idea of Mrs. Courteney doing anything so unworldly and out of character that, for a moment, she missed the full implication of Martin's remark.

"So your mother really just more or less runs Foley Grange for Jerome?"

"That's about it. He's the steel hand in the velvet glove here." And Martin leaned forward and gave the fire a rather vicious poke. "Not so much velvet glove about it either, at times," he added, with a slight grimace.

"I—see."

Light was beginning to break upon Naomi, in more ways than one. She and her mother, it seemed, were not the only ones to whom Uncle Enoch's fortune had represented luxury and independence one day. Incredible though it appeared, the dignified Mrs. Courteney and the charming Martin had also waited with acute, if not desperate, anxiety to hear the terms of the will.

All the more credit to them, then—or to *him, for* Naomi was convinced that the impulse had come from Martin—that her own poor claims should have been considered.

She looked across at him almost tenderly in the firelight, and the words of warm appreciation were actually forming on her lips when—a most unwelcome interruption—Jerome came back into the room to say that Martin was wanted on the telephone.

"So late?" grumbled Martin, also aware, it seemed, that a magic moment had been bereft of its spell. "What does anyone want at *this* hour?"

"She didn't say," replied his brother drily. "But she sounded very wide-awake."

"Oh, well—" Martin got up, with a laugh, then, and went away out of the room, leaving Naomi feeling slightly self-conscious, alone with Jerome.

For a moment there was silence, while he stood there, leaning on his stick and looking down into the fire. Then, unexpectedly, he said, "So you get on very well already with Martin?"

"I do, as a matter of fact." She made no attempt to keep the cool note of resentment out of her voice for, after all, it was not his business whether she did or not. "But what makes you think so?"

"A cosy chat for two in the firelight seems to suggest it," he replied, with that slight touch of mockery.

"Why should it? What, come to that, are *we* having?" she retorted with spirit.

"We?" He glanced at her in astonishment. Then he laughed, more heartily than she had seen him do so far. "I don't know that I'd call this a cosy chat, exactly."

"I daresay not. But then I wouldn't call you a cosy person."

"God forbid!" he said fervently. "But why do you resent my noticing your friendship with Martin?"

"I don't resent it," she replied quickly—and not quite truthfully, as she was immediately aware. "I merely wondered why you bothered to comment on it."

"It interested me—that's why," he told her coolly. "But then *you* interest me—naturally."

She failed to see where the "naturally" came in. So her voice was a couple of degrees cooler still as she said, "Just as a study of human nature, do you mean?"

"As a study of human nature in a special set of circumstances, let us say." Again that faint smile. Not a particularly kind one, she thought. And suddenly she found that what he had said to her in the studio rankled afresh.

"I know—" she spoke curtly—"you're so certain that I came hurrying along to Foley Court in the expectation of financial gain, aren't you?"

"At least that was a possibility I didn't dismiss."

He was laughing at her, she knew, and she felt her hold on her temper slipping. All the same, she managed to keep her voice steady as she said contemptuously, "Then you should have no difficulty in finding an explanation for my friendliness towards

Martin. He and his mother inherited the fortune which I and my mother expected to get. By your reckoning, shouldn't I be leaning over backwards to make myself pleasant to him?"

She knew it was rude and ill-judged of her to speak like this, but the faint mockery in that thin, dark face annoyed her more than she could explain to herself.

At least her words had the effect of wiping that expression off his face—though, unexpectedly, in puzzlement rather than anger.

"What makes you think Martin inherited anything?" he asked curiously.

"Why—" it was Naomi's turn to look puzzled— "your mother said so, in her letter. She said Uncle Enoch left almost everything to her and her son— *Oh!*" Her hand flew to her lips in dismay, as a sudden, appalling idea presented itself to her. "Do you mean—? You can't mean—?"

"I'm afraid I do." The mocking glance was back again, in a degree which sent the color flaming into her face.. "You've been having your cosy chat with the wrong son, my dear. To use your own words, you should have been leaning over backwards to make yourself pleasant to *me*."

CHAPTER TWO

"OH, *no!*""

The shock of surprise was so acute that Naomi simply could not hide her consternation. And only Jerome's unkind little laugh brought her back to the realization that her dismay was capable of several interpretations.

"I'm sorry," he said, though any regret sounded purely academic. "Does it matter *so* much that Martin is the one without the money?"

"No." With a tremendous effort, she recovered a degree of self-possession. "It doesn't matter in the least, so far as my liking him is concerned."

"But in other respects?" That ironic note crept into his voice again.

She thought for a moment of trying to make decent excuses, of pretending that she could blandly ignore his mocking hints. Then suddenly she felt convinced that the best thing to use with this man was directness. Brutal directness, if necessary.

"Sit down," she said curtly, forgetting that he was in his own house. "I want to talk to you, and it makes me nervous to have you standing over me like that." '

He raised his eyebrows, perhaps at her tone, but he laughed and, sliding his stick to the floor, in that rather awkward way which would have caught at her sympathy if she had let it, he sat down in the chair which Martin had vacated and leaned back, a little wearily, she thought.

"Well?"

"I see you don't like half-truths," she began slowly. "At least, only cynical half-truths which you prefer to deal out yourself—"

"Thanks!"

"You asked for it," she told him brusquely. "So I'm going to explain my exact position to you. My mother and I are rather feckless people—" she was not going to blame her mother alone—"and after my father's death we lived—precariously, but quite happily—on the moderate bounty of Uncle Enoch. I'm not going to pretend anything else. My mother, quite simply, is not the kind of woman who could make a living for herself and a child, and I—"

"Was a schoolgirl," he pointed out, in all fairness.

"Yes. Though I suppose one could argue that I should have got down to the serious business of earning a living some time ago. But Uncle Enoch always assured us—assured my mother—that when he died we should inherit most of his money."

"On the strength of which you got into debt?" Jerome suggested—a piece of inspired guesswork which secretly somewhat shook Naomi.

"We did, as a matter of fact." She grimly shouldered half the responsibility for this too, since to do otherwise would have seemed to her disloyalty. "When he died, as you probably know, he left my mother an annuity of two hundred pounds and me fifty pounds and some good advice."

"What was the advice?" Jerome looked genuinely curious.

" 'To work hard and maintain myself in diligence and self-respect, as in this state I should be much happier than if maintained in idleness'," quoted Naomi. And, because she still thought this

grimly comic, in contrast to what had been expected, she began to laugh.

Her companion looked across at her in surprise.

"Do you find that funny?" he enquired.

"I do rather. Don't you?"

"A little. But then I'm not personally concerned. As a substitute for a fortune, it's a tough joke to take."

"Oh, Uncle Enoch didn't mean it as a joke." Naomi was almost shocked at the idea of attributing humorous intentions to Uncle Enoch. "He *believed* that. And anyway, I suppose it's got a sort of horrid basic truth about it," she added. "But it was a frightful shock."

"It must have been."

"Then Mrs. Courteney's letter came. By the same post as the letter from the lawyers, as it happened."

"It was intended to," he said. "But go on."

It was her turn to give a curious glance at him, but she obediently continued her story.

"Mother was a good deal comforted by the letter. She's optimistic by nature and can build happy dreams of the future on practically nothing. To her it seemed vital that I should accept the invitation with all speed."

"But not to you?"

She hesitated.

"You musn't think I'm ungrateful," she said slowly. "I think it was generous of you and your mother to want to—to redress the balance a little. But, if I'm frank, I didn't much care for the idea of being sent here on approval."

"You felt we should have handed out a certain proportion of our inheritance, without deciding whether you were a worthy recipient or not?"

"I don't think *worthiness* had anything to do with it," she began. Then she colored and said quickly, "I'm sorry. This sounds great cheek, because, of course, it's entirely your own business what you do with your money. Only—"

She stopped. But he said, "Go on. You interest me. If the positions had been reversed, for instance, what would you have done?"

Naomi smiled.

"It's always so easy to say what one would have done with someone else's money, isn't it? But I think—I hope—that if I felt I had inherited something which, normally, belonged partly to someone else, it wouldn't even interest me whether they were nice or nasty, worthy or unworthy. They could drink their share, for all I cared. Or found an orphanage.

Or waste the lot—or be of great benefit to the human race. That would be *their* business. Mine would simply be whether or not they were entitled *to the* money."

"You're a great believer in the rights of the individual, I see." He smiled, but with something warmer than the faintly weary

cynicism which was so often in his face. "I'll think over what you've said, Naomi."

"I—I didn't mean it in that way," she stammered. "I mean— wasn't seriously suggesting *you* should look at it that way. You asked me what I would do—just as someone might ask me what I'd do if I won the pools. I was only speaking theoretically."

"Yes, I realize that." He reached for his stick and got to his feet again. "But the odd thing is—" he stared down at her almost moodily—"I believe that, unlike almost everyone else, you would put it to practice! It's time you went to bed now, child."

She glanced at the clock, gave a slight exclamation, and jumped to her feet.

"I'd no idea it was so late!"

"No? The cosy chat extended a little further than we expected, didn't it? Goodnight."

Again his dismissal was absolute. She bade him goodnight, without question, and turned to go. But when she had almost reached the door, he said, without raising his voice, "Naomi—"

"Yes?"

She turned, and then came slowly back until she stood quite close beside him, in the firelight.

He looked down at her almost sombrely still, but the faintest smile lifted the corners of his mouth. And what he said was, "I'm sorry I was rude to you at dinner."

The apology was so entirely unexpected that all her previous resentment melted in a rush of warm feeling.

"Oh! it didn't *matter!*" Naomi exclaimed, from her heart.

"Didn't it?" He gave a slight laugh and, to her astonishment, raised his hand and lightly touched the curve of her cheek.

"No, of course not! As a matter of fact, I was sorry that I was so silly and clumsy in what I said."

"You were neither silly nor clumsy," he stated categorically. Then, as the smile touched his eyes at last, "Martin was right when he said I was churlish. But don't tell him I said so. I seldom admit myself in the wrong. Now go along."

She went, half touched, half disturbed by this final scene. And the full impression of it remained with her, even though she met Martin in the hall and he tried to detain her further.

"No, I really must go to bed now," she insisted, in answer to his teasing, almost affectionate plea. "It's late, and I'm genuinely tired."

"Very well. But I'm sorry our conversation was interrupted at just that point, Naomi. We'll continue it tomorrow."

"Yes, indeed," she agreed. But as she went on up the stairs she had some difficulty in recalling what they had been talking about when Jerome had interrupted them.

Upstairs in her beautiful bedroom, she rather thoughtfully undressed and got ready for bed.

It had been an interesting, if somewhat agitating, first evening, and a good deal of the interest, she realized, centred round the man who had just apologized so unexpectedly and then dismissed her peremptorily.

"I've never met anyone at all like him before," Naomi thought. "But then I've never met a famous man of the theatre—or any other sphere, come to that. I suppose he's used to having people give way to him and accept his judgments without question. Perhaps that was why he looked astonished when I refused to accept his amused criticism and insisted on explaining my position."

And then, when he had heard what she had to say, his reaction had been unexpectedly generous, she reflected. Not, of course, that she attached serious weight to his half mocking promise to think over her arguments. But there had been generosity in the fact that he called her back and apologized for something he considered unjust. One had to like him for that, even though, in other ways—She frowned, trying to decide if, on balance she liked or disliked him.

"Martin's quite right about one thing: he makes much too heavy weather of that limp of his," Naomi told herself, as she got into bed and relaxed deliciously in the unwonted sensation of luxury. "But perhaps if one's active and impatient and gifted it's hard to be physically imperfect. Maybe it embitters one slightly. I don't know—" She spent a few minutes wondering if this, or anything else, would make her feel bitter about life.

But then the certainty that life was too interesting just now to be embittering—and also a great desire to sleep—forced her to abandon her reflections. Naomi's long lashes flickered once or

twice and then were still. Foley Grange and its problems no longer existed for her.

The next morning she awoke to the kind of clear, luminous, almost spring-like day with which February sometimes deludes us into the belief that winter is over. For a moment she was not quite sure where she was. Then the events of the previous evening came flooding back upon her and, springing out of bed, she ran to the window.

At home this operation would have involved donning a warm dressing-gown and groping for slippers. But here all was warmth and comfort, and under her bare feet the carpet was as soft and springy as moss.

From the window of her bedroom, Naomi looked down on a wide, flagged terrace, from which a large sloping garden ran down to a small stream. Beyond this the ground rose again in rough parkland and finally merged into what was obviously farmland. It was difficult to decide where the line of the Foley estate ended and open country began. But at least it was obvious that the property was a handsome one.

"I wish Mother could see it," Naomi thought, sorry that her mother had been denied the pleasures she was now enjoying.

But then a fresh reflection cooled her enthusiasm for that idea. For if her mother, in her present mood of determined matchmaking, could see this estate, she would undoubtedly start making embarrassingly energetic plans for Naomi's subjugation of its owner. And Naomi thought she would rather not have the subjugation of Jerome Fennell on her plate at the moment.

To retain his moderate good will—and to enjoy the charming company of Martin—that was more in keeping with her present

wishes. And, smiling at the prospect, she bathed and dressed rapidly and made her way downstairs.

Breakfast, it seemed, was not a strictly timed meal, at any rate at weekends, and Jerome was the only one at the table. He looked up from his coffee and newspaper with a slight nod and said, "Ring for whatever you want."

"Should I not wait for Mrs. Courteney?"

"No. She usually breakfasts in her room."

"And Martin?"

"He has already breakfasted, I expect, and is off somewhere on the estate."

She was sorry she had missed Martin. But she obediently rang the bell and asked for coffee and toast from the servant who appeared.

"Nothing more substantial?" enquired Jerome, without looking up from the newspaper to which he had now returned.

"No, thank you. I never eat much breakfast."

"At your age you should. How did you sleep?"

"Wonderfully!"

He laughed at that, on a faintly envious note, she thought, and finally put down his newspaper and asked, "Have you and Martin made any plan for the day?"

"Why, no," She was a little surprised at the question.

"I expect he'll want to take you round and show you the place."

"I should like that!" But then something inexplicable to herself made her add, "But wouldn't you rather take me round?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Why should I?"

"Well, the place *is* yours, isn't it?"

"Strictly speaking, I suppose it is." He seemed less inclined to lay personal claim to it than Martin had led her to expect. "But, to be fair, I think Martin is fonder of it than I am."

"You don't care specially for—well, for country life or a country home?"

"Only in a secondary sort of way, Naomi. My real love is the theatre, and that automatically makes me a town creature, I suppose."

"Was it always your love—the theatre?"

"Always."

"I think I'd like to see you at work in your real environment," she said, speaking her thoughts aloud.

"Why?"

"Because you change somehow when you speak of it. You look happy and—purposeful."

He looked astonished, perhaps more at her wording than her actual observation. But, instead of replying mockingly, as she half expected, he said.

"Well, you can come and watch me if you like."

"*Can I?*" She colored, with excitement and something else she could not quite define. "But how?"

"I'll take you up to London with me on Monday, if you really want to come. It will mean leaving early and returning late. But if you think it's worth it—"

"Of course I do! I've never seen anything of the other side of the footlights. It must be fascinating. Oh—" she stopped suddenly and looked doubtful— "but won't Mrs. Courteney think it rather rude of me to go off like that?"

"No. Why should she?"

"Well, she was kind enough to ask me down here, and if I rush off to London for the day—"

"7 asked you down here," he interrupted coolly.

"Did you really?" She glanced at him curiously. "But she sent the invitation, didn't she?"

"At my request."

"I see. Then it was your idea, from the beginning, that something should perhaps be done about Uncle Enoch's unwelcome brush-off?"

"I suppose one might say so, though that isn't important." He seemed faintly bored by what he obviously considered a detail. "Do you want to come with me on Monday?"

"Oh, yes, please!"

"All right. Then Martin can have you for today and show you round the place. And, speaking of Martin, here he is." He glanced out of the window and then, picking up his stick, got to his feet.

She was a little amused at the idea that he should *allow* Martin to have her for the day, but it also gave her a pleasurable sensation of being in demand. So she smiled brilliantly at him as he turned to go.

The radiance of her glance seemed to surprise as well as amuse him, but he merely said, "You funny child. I hope your first visit back-stage won't be disappointingly ordinary."

"I'm sure it won't." She spoke with conviction, because she felt certain that, whatever his faults might be, nothing which concerned Jerome was ordinary.

Two minutes after he had gone, Martin came breezing into the room, fresh, energetic and full of good humor.

"Hello, there!" He actually ruffled Naomi's hair slightly as he passed. "Any coffee left?"

"Plenty." She proceeded to pour him out a cup, and as she handed it to him across the table she could not forbear a smile at him too.

He didn't say she was a funny child. He was evidently more used to provoking radiant glances. Instead he told her, "I nearly woke you up early, to come riding with me. But then I thought you'd had a tiring day yesterday and might prefer to have your sleep out."

"I shouldn't have minded. Except that I don't think my standard of riding is up to yours. I've never ridden more than an old horse, at a farm where we stayed once on holiday."

"I'll teach you," he promised carelessly. "What are you going to do with yourself this morning?"

She thought of Jerome's saying that Martin could have her for the day. But, suppressing that not altogether tactful dictum, she merely remarked, "I hadn't made any plans. I don't know if your mother wants—"

"Mother interests herself almost exclusively in her own affairs," Martin declared airily. "She won't have arranged anything specially for you. Why not come out with me?"

"I'd love to."

"I'll show you round the place, if you don't mind a fair amount of walking—?"

"Of course not!"

"Then tomorrow we might take the car and go further afield and see more of the country. And on Monday—"

"On Monday I'm going to London." she said quickly.

"To London?" He looked extremely taken aback. "But I thought you were staying at least a week."

"Oh, I don't mean that I'm going for good. Jerome is taking me to London for the day."

"Whatever for?" Martin wanted to know.

"To see him at work, at the theatre."

"Good lord, what egotism! I thought you'd come down here for a nice country visit. Who wants to trail all the way up to London and back, just to see Jerome in action? You should have refused outright."

"But I want to go. I told him so. That's why— rather to my surprise—he said I could go with him if I liked."

"Oh, Naomi, what nonsense!" Martin laughed impatiently. "It's all as dull as can be, my dear, until the whole thing gets at least to dress rehearsal stage. You imagine, because it looks fine on the night, that—"

"I don't imagine anything," Naomi stated firmly. "I don't know a thing about it. But I'd like to, and that's why I'm going."

"You'll be bored to tears," Martin grumbled. "It's a waste of a perfectly good day. Why not enjoy Foley while you're here, and go and watch Jerome showing off some other time, when you're in London anyway?"

She knew there was a good deal in what he said— apart from the unfair reference to his brother showing off—but she had the queer feeling that Jerome had been, in some obscure way, gratified by her show of interest, and not for the world would she now have him think that interest had not been genuine.

"I've made the arrangement now," she explained, though pacifically. "And it's a chance I wouldn't miss for the world. It might not come again."

This was the point at which Martin apparently found her funny.

"You're a funny kid," he declared, though with an almost affectionate glance of amusement. "I shouldn't have thought Jerome would have been your cup of tea."

She wanted to say he was not. But she felt that any extension of the argument would be ill-judged. So she merely smiled and said, "I think any specialist is interesting on his particular job. *You* may be used to having a famous producer in the family. But *I've* never even seen a stage personality at close quarters before. You musn't mind if I find it all fascinating."

"I don't mind." He grinned at her, mollified. "I think you're sweet, and you shall have it your own way. Go with Jerome to London on Monday and I'll take you riding on Tuesday, and afterwards you shall tell us which you really preferred."

Naomi secretly thought that nothing would induce her to make pronouncements on such a dubious topic. But again she covered her reflections with a smile, and presently she fetched a coat and she and Martin went out together into the bright February morning.

All her life so far Naomi's companions had tended to be of her own sex. At school there had been the other girls—with an occasional one-sided friendship with one of the teachers. At home she had seen much more of her mother than anyone else. Martin could have been a great deal less exhilarating and exciting than he really was and still have been a novel companion—so that the morning with him was an altogether wonderful experience.

Even the leafless branches and the empty flowerbeds could not make the big garden anything but attractive in her eyes. And when they found snowdrops under the trees and a couple of primroses in a sheltered spot near the stream, Naomi felt she was on almost enchanted ground. .

In the stable-yard—where it was obvious that he was on the best of terms with the stableman—Martin introduced her to his favorite horse, a beautiful chestnut creature with a satin coat and a wild and wicked glance. But he also showed her a gentle, soft-eyed mare who would be splendid, he declared, as her own first mount.

"Who rides her in the usual way?" Naomi asked, patting the shining flank.

"I do occasionally—and sometimes Antonia comes over and gives her a run. She was Jerome's, you know," Martin explained, "and he couldn't ever bring himself to part with her."

"Jerome's?" Naomi repeated in surprise. "But did Jerome ever ride? What about that limp—that injury?"

"Oh, good lord, that was only a matter of five or six years ago," Martin said. "He wasn't born with it. He had an accident at the theatre. Fell from the paint bridge, or whatever they call that bit that's slung across the flies—way up above the stage. He smashed his hip, among other things, but I suppose he was lucky not to have been killed. They patched him up pretty well, but of course it put paid to his career."

"His career? But he's still producing."

"Yes, certainly. But that was a second effort. He started as an actor. Some people thought he was the most brilliant actor of the younger generation, I believe," Martin added, with a carelessness born of familiarity with the story rather than natural callousness, Naomi felt sure.

"But, Martin, how—awful for him! He—loves the stage so, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he does. And I'm sorry for him, to that extent. But I can't exactly shed tears about him. After all, he did find another job in the theatre world —and, even if he hadn't, there was always enough money to keep him in great comfort for the rest of his days."

"Do you think that matters so vitally to a real artist?" Naomi asked doubtfully.

"My view is that it matters to everyone," declared Martin with a laugh. "After all, the accident could have happened to some poor devil who was struggling to make a living at the one thing he could do. That *would* have been a tragedy."

"Yes, of course." Naomi bit her lip. "And I imagine Jerome would be the first to admit that—"

"Oddly enough, that's true." Martin glanced at her curiously. "But how did you know?"

"By noticing that he is realistic and not at all self-pitying, I suppose," Naomi said slowly. "But sometimes it must be almost more pain than pleasure to work in the world one loves and yet be denied the final expression of what is in one."

"You're too soft-hearted by half," Martin declared with a laugh. "Don't let Jerome see you're sorry for him. He has a thing about being pitied."

"I've noticed that too," Naomi told him drily.

And after that they went on to visit the nearby farm where once more, Naomi noticed, Martin appeared to be a great favorite with everyone.

It was not that he laid himself out to be charming. He *was* charming—with an easy, effortless good humor which was obviously natural to him. He struck the right balance between sympathy and chaffing, between authority and familiarity, and it was evident that those who worked for him (or was it for Jerome?) adored him.

Curious, Naomi thought, that anyone who got on so well with so many still failed signally in his relationship with his own brother. She could only think that the fault was largely Jerome's.

Time passed to, quickly and enjoyably that she was astonished when Martin observed that it was almost lunch time and that they must hurry back to the house.

"Oh, Martin, I *have* enjoyed it!" she exclaimed. "I've never had anything to do with a big estate before, and I had no idea there were so many interesting things to see."

"There are plenty more," he assured her, evidently gratified by her praise. "There'll be hardly enough time to cover them all while you're here. You don't really want to run off to London on Monday, do you?"

She was surprised that he should return to the subject, and chagrined to find that her own enthusiasm for the expedition had waned considerably in the light of the new-found interests. But something which mattered more than her own immediate pleasure moved her, and her tone was firm as she said, "It's all arranged. I'm looking forward to the trip— and I'm *going*."

"Bless your obstinate little heart," laughed Martin, and he kissed the tip of her ear, which charmed and annoyed her in almost equal measure.

"I'm not obstinate," she declared. "Only—I I think it gave Jerome real pleasure when I said I would like to go. I'm not going to snub him or hurt him now by appearing not to want to go after all."

"You mean you're bothering about Jerome's sensitive feelings?" Martin looked incredulous. "My sweet child, he just hasn't got any. He's as tough as old boots."

"I don't agree." Naomi set her mouth in an obstinate line which her mother would have recognized. "And nor am I going to discuss the matter further. I'll be happy to go with you anywhere on any day except Monday. On that day I'm going to London."

"I adore you," said Martin carelessly. And on that they went in to lunch.

The rest of the weekend followed the usual pattern of weekends in country houses all over England. On Saturday evening a few friends and neighbors came in, and Naomi found herself being introduced as "a cousin in some degree which we haven't quite worked out." That was Mrs. Courteney, being gracious and showing that Naomi was accepted—though how far accepted one was not absolutely sure.

Martin, of course, was in his element on a social occasion of this kind, and even Jerome unexpectedly emerged as a charming, if faintly sardonic host.

"You seem to be settling down very well."

Naomi jumped slightly as Antonia Vayne sat down on the settee beside her, though the other girl's half-laughing tone sounded friendly enough.

"Yes, I am. The place is charming—and everyone is very kind," Naomi explained quickly. A shade too quickly perhaps.

"Not so much of the Cinderella touch, after all?" Antonia suggested wickedly.

"Oh, I feel perfectly awful when I think of making that joke to you," Naomi exclaimed. "It was so *silly*—and in such bad taste too, when they'd been kind enough to invite me here, and not given me any real reason to expect the Cinderella treatment."

"Don't apologize. I think it was rather a neat way of describing the situation," Antonia declared amusedly. Then she leaned forward and asked in, a mischievous whisper which caused Naomi the most acute disquiet, "Have you been following out Mother's advice?"

"Oh—please!" Naomi's cheeks burnt with sudden distress. "It must have sounded simply dreadful to a casual listener, but—"

"No, it didn't," the other girl said coolly. "It sounded clever and single-minded. Only—just so that there shan't be any misunderstanding or disappointment—I thought I should let you know that only one of the sons is available for the concentration your mother so ardently recommended.

"I don't—know what—you mean." Naomi drew sharply away from the other girl and stared at her. And suddenly, and quite incredibly, there was some subtle suggestion of menace about the smiling Antonia, in the elegantly simple dress which looked as though it had grown upon her.

"Don't you? Then you must have forgotten just what your mother said to you. 'Concentrate on the son, darling—'""the very intonation was horribly evocative of that scene at the station—" 'I feel in my bones that *she's* not going to be much help. Concentrate on him!' "

"Oh, *please*—" exclaimed Naomi again, in terror lest anyone should overhear this appalling quotation. "You can't really suppose I would take that nonsense seriously?"

"No?" Antonia gave her a reflective and quite unbelieving glance. "Well, just in case you did— remember that only Martin is available for such attentions."

"Really?" Suddenly Naomi was angrily cool in the face of this near-insolence. "And what is Jerome's position, pray?"

"Jerome," said Antonia quite gently, "is my affair."

And, with a nod, she got up and moved away, leaving Naomi trembling slightly. Partly with anger, but partly with the sensation of having suddenly looked over a cliff that she had not known was there.

Someone else came up and drew her into conversation almost immediately, and she had to force herself to be attentive and polite. But immediately beneath the surface of her apparently easy talk, Naomi's thoughts ran in a dark, troubled stream.

Not that she either needed or accepted Antonia's crude words about Jerome. But it was disturbing in the extreme to reflect that the one person who had overheard that unfortunate conversation at the station was one who might choose to use the knowledge dangerously.

Although everyone was kind and friendly—and more than one pressed her to drop in while she was staying at Foley—Naomi was ill at ease during the rest of the evening, and glad when it was over.

The next day it seemed that Mrs. Courteney was the only one who expected to attend morning church, but she seemed quite pleased when Naomi offered to come with her. They walked together across the fields, to a charming little Norman church, with a peaceful and curiously timeless atmosphere which made Naomi feel that perhaps she had been attaching too much importance to her own small affairs.

This philosophical mood was put to some test on the way home, however, when Mrs. Courteney spoke of the previous evening, and said she had been glad to see Naomi and Antonia getting on so well together.

"I noticed you having quite an intimate little talk on the settee," she remarked.

"Ye-es," agreed Naomi. And, for the life of her, she could think of nothing to add to that.

"Antonia's an unusual girl," Mrs. Courteney went on, on a note of undoubted approval. "She has poise—which one doesn't see so very often nowadays. A very *civilized* sort of person, one might say."

Naomi could not help thinking that Mrs. Courteney would have been surprised if she could have known how much of the tooth and claw there had been about Antonia's utterances the previous evening. But since one could not, of course, mention that, she contented herself with asking whether Antonia had any sort of profession.

"Oh, yes, indeed! She works with one of the big stage costume designers. That's why she and Jerome have so much in common."

"I see."

"She travels to London two or three times a week. Sometimes by train—from the station next to ours— but often Jerome takes her up in his car if he is going."

"Oh," said Naomi, and she found herself hoping with quite passionate intensity that Jerome was not proposing to do that on the morrow.

During the afternoon—and, indeed, as long as the light lasted—Martin took her driving, proving once more such an excellent guide and such a gay and absorbing companion that the time passed more quickly than she would have believed possible.

He too, quite obviously enjoyed himself, and already his air towards her was one of such friendly, almost affectionate intimacy that they might have known each other for months. It was all very delightful—except for the fact that, once or twice over dinner, Jerome raised an eyebrow and permitted himself a cynically amused glance in their direction.

No remark was made, however, and everything went very smoothly until, at the end of the ten o'clock news, the B.B.C. announced in gentlemanly accents that the morrow's weather would be unusually fine and warm for that time of year.

"Then we'll drive to the coast, Naomi," Martin exclaimed. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"She can't. She's driving to London with me," put in his brother drily.

"Good heavens, is that an order?"

"No, of course not. Naomi said she would like to come, and I'm taking her."

"But anyone can change their mind," Martin retorted impatiently. "And to tell the truth, Naomi's not at all keen now. She more or less told me so."

"Martin, I didn't!" Naomi flushed with indignation and something like alarm.

"Of course you did, darling." Martin smiled, with easy and most unwelcome conviction. "Don't be so self-sacrificing. I told you, Jerome's feelings aren't so easily hurt. Are they, old boy?"

Jerome looked suddenly bleak and withdrawn.

"They're not involved," he said coldly. "Naomi is perfectly free to do whatever she likes—naturally."

"There you are!" Martin turned in amused triumph to Naomi. "I told you not to worry. You said you couldn't very well get out of the arrangement, but—"

"I didn't say that at all!"

"Well, that was the idea. You said Jerome was so pleased about your going and you couldn't hurt his feelings by—"

"Do you mind leaving my feelings out of it? The whole discussion is getting ridiculous." And, reaching for his stick, Jerome got up and limped to the door.

"But I want to explain—" Naomi ran after him in her eagerness.

"Please don't." He looked down at her with the indifference of a stranger. "It would only bore me profoundly. I hope you enjoy your day at the coast tomorrow."

And, lightly brushing her detaining hand from his arm, he went out of the room.

CHAPTER THREE

"You tactless beast!"

Naomi turned on Martin with a fury which astonished even herself. And not until Mrs. Courteney's chilling protesting voice said, "Really, Naomi!" did she remember that they were not alone.

"Bless your heart, you needn't get so hot about it." Martin was still laughing, though he looked slightly taken aback by the violence of her attack. "If Jerome likes to sulk, he must. He'll soon get over it."

"He wasn't sulking." Unexpectedly, her voice quivered, and she had to bite her lip suddenly to control herself. "He was angry—justly so, and he was —was—"

"We're leaving out the hurt feelings by special request, if you remember," interrupted Martin a little drily. "Don't worry, Naomi."

"But I do worry! You've done me out of something I was looking forward to very much, and you've put me in an odiously false position."

"My dear, aren't you getting a little too excited?" Mrs. Courteney spoke rather distastefully, as though she found in Naomi a distressing lack of that poise she had praised so highly in Antonia. "After all, as Martin says, it will probably be much pleasanter here than in town, if it's really warm tomorrow. And I'm sure Jerome doesn't mind in the least about your change of plans."

Naomi was perfectly sure that he did. Or rather, that he minded the way in which the change had been made. But she could hardly start arguing with her hostess and, in any case, she felt that she had already made what Mrs. Courteney regarded as an unseemly amount of fuss.

She murmured something apologetic, therefore, and tried to control the little tremors of anger which still shook her. But she could not bring herself to smile at Martin, or to reply lightly to the placatory nonsense with which he tried to charm her into a better mood. And, after a while, she bade them both goodnight and went to her room.

It was early, and Martin had protested as much, but she just could not sit there any longer and be calm and pleasant when she felt so furious and miserable.

"I'm being idiotic," she told herself, as she walked agitatedly about her lovely bedroom. "It can't matter *so* much. But I could hit Martin. I could *hit* him! Telling half-lies about me like that, in order to get his own way and score off his brother."

And at the thought of the cold, indifferent way Jerome had looked at her when she tried to explain, she actually felt an angry tear trickle down the side of her nose.

"Well, that's the silliest thing yet!" she exclaimed aloud. And then there was a light tap on the door and the housekeeper came into the room.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Thurrock. I didn't realize you had already come upstairs. I just looked in to make sure your electric blanket was on."

"Th—thank you," said Naomi, turning her head away. But a second tear followed the first one and splashed on to her hands as they lay clasped in her lap, and after a moment Mrs. Sparks asked kindly, "What's the matter, my lamb?"

"It's nothing, really," Naomi asserted. And then, before she could stop herself, the whole story came pouring out, in a not very coherent stream.

"It all sounds rather small and silly when I tell it," she exclaimed, twisting her hands together. "But I *wanted* to go to London, and I think he wanted me to go—and I was made to sound as though I didn't, but as though I was so full of myself that I thought it would be a blow to anyone not to have me and so I'd make a grand self-sacrificing gesture—and it wasn't—I mean it wouldn't have been—a self-sacrifice *at all*. Oh, dear, I'm not making it very clear, am I?"

"Yes, it's perfectly clear," Mrs. Sparks said gravely. "The tears are partly because you're disappointed, but mostly because you feel you might have hurt someone undeservedly."

"They're a bit of sheer rage, too," Naomi conceded, with a feeble little smile, at which Mrs. Sparks laughed.

"Well," she asked, after a moment, "what have you decided to do?"

"Do?" repeated Naomi doubtfully. "There isn't very much I *can* do, is there? I don't feel I want to go out with Martin tomorrow—I feel too angry with him. And yet—"

"You still want to go to London?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then I should go."

"*Would* you, Mrs. Sparks? But how? Mr. Jerome made it very clear he didn't want me." And Naomi looked down disconsolately at the tightly clasped hands in her lap.

Did he?" The housekeeper lightly touched her bent head. "But then Mr. Jerome, like the best of men, doesn't always know himself what he wants."

"D—doesn't he?"

"No." Mrs. Sparks looked thoughtful. "He usually goes off about half-past eight when he's going to town, and Thorpe brings his car round from the garage to the front of the house, just as he's finishing his breakfast. If I had your breakfast sent up to you in your room quite early, and you were dressed in good time—"

"I could be sitting in the car when he came out!" exclaimed Naomi, suddenly looking eager.

"That's what I thought."

"But wouldn't he be rather—angry?"

"I don't know. Perhaps you don't think it's worth risking that?"

Naomi was silent. She was not at all anxious to incur Jerome's anger again. But then still less did she want him to go off to London on his own, with the unpleasant impression of her left by the recent scene.

At last she said, "Would you—really arrange for me to have my breakfast in my room—early?"

"That would be very easy."

"Then I think I'll go." Naomi smiled suddenly, and absently wiped her still wet cheeks with the backs of her hands. "Mrs. Sparks, will you tell me something? Have you known Mr. Jerome for a long time?"

"Twenty-five years."

"Why, he must have been just a little boy when you first knew him, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"Are you—fond of him?" Naomi asked curiously, though she hardly knew what made her ask the question.

"Yes." The housekeeper smiled slightly. "He was often a difficult boy, and he's sometimes a very hard man. But I wouldn't have any other master under Heaven."

"Oh, what a nice way of putting it!" Naomi smiled again, more fully this time, and impulsively put her arm round the rather austere figure of the housekeeper and hugged her. "I'm so glad you came in!"

"Then go to bed now and sleep well," Mrs. Sparks told her. "I'll have you woken in good time."

And then she went away, leaving Naomi to go to bed in much calmer and happier state of mind than she would have believed possible half an hour ago.

She fell asleep immediately, and slept quite dreamlessly, until a tap on the door woke her, and the fragrant scent of coffee roused her to the recollection of her plan.

To tell the truth, in the chill light of the early February morning, the idea seemed less of an inspiration than it had the night before. But she drank her coffee and nibbled a piece of toast, and then resolutely got up and dressed.

Contrary to the optimistic forecast the previous evening Naomi thought it was a cold and uninviting morning, so she slipped on a warm coat and took a scarf to put over her head, and pretended to herself that it was only the weather which made her still feel shivery.

Then, after two false starts and a good deal of checking of her watch, she opened her door and went boldly downstairs.

She had not decided what she would say or do if she met Martin. Still less what her line of action would be if she met Jerome. But she was not called on to make a decision on either issue. No one was in sight as she came down the stairs and crossed the hall to the big front door. And, when she peeped outside, Jerome's black Jaguar was standing in sleek solitude immediately opposite her.

Without hesitation, she went across and got into the front seat. And then, just to demonstrate to herself how cool and collected she really was, she took out her compact, inspected herself in the mirror and applied an unnecessary dusting of powder to her straight, pretty nose.

She had just completed this operation when Jerome came out, opened the door and got in beside her.

"And what," he asked disagreeably, "do you think you're doing?"

"I'm coming to London with you. Remember?"

"I thought you wanted to go to the coast with Martin."

"Then you're wrong, and if you hadn't rudely refused to hear my explanation last night, you would know better."

"Was I rude last night?"

"Very. You told me it would bore you if I tried to explain myself. That isn't a nice thing to say to anyone who is upset."

"I wasn't in a nice mood," he replied savagely.

"No, I noticed that."

"Why are you trembling?" he asked suddenly.

"A little bit because I'm cold,, but mostly because you frighten me," replied Naomi candidly.

He gave her a long stare at that. Then he laughed suddenly and started the car.

"For a frightened young woman you have a great talent for seizing the initiative," he remarked drily. "Have you had any breakfast?"

"I h—had coffee and half a piece of toast in my room."

"Why only half a piece?"

"I felt too scared to eat more."

"When you're not scared you must have enough assurance to sink a battleship," he observed. "We'll stop somewhere on the way down, and you can have another cup of coffee and a whole piece of toast."

"Thank you," Naomi said meekly.

"What for?"

"For letting me come, I suppose."

"You didn't give me a great deal of choice, did you?" he pointed out. "Short of slinging you out on to the drive, I had to take you with me."

"You can drop me off at the gatehouse and I'll walk back, if you'd prefer it," she said submissively.

"Don't be silly," Jerome told her curtly. And they passed the gatehouse and turned into the open road.

He drove fast and well, and presently Naomi relaxed beside him and watched the grey of the early morning begin to flush into the fine, warm day which had been promised. The smooth motion of the car and the varied landscape streaming past the window soothed her, and sometimes she just watched Jerome's strong, beautiful hands on the wheel and was oddly contented.

They drove in silence for quite a long time, and she thought perhaps he had forgotten about promising her a second breakfast. But presently he turned off the main road, with the practised certainty of one who knew the way very well, and brought the car to a standstill outside an unpretentious-looking eating-place.

It was not really much more than "a good pull-up for carmen." But when Jerome sounded the horn, a fresh-faced young man came charging out, beaming with good humor, and cried, "Why, Mr, Fennell, sir, this is an early pleasure. What'll you have?" Shall I bring it out here?"

"Yes, please, Joe. Some of Maggie's best coffee and rolls or toast or something of the sort."

"In five minutes, sir. And how's Miss Vayne? —oh, I see it's not Miss Vayne." He ducked his head to smile in through the window

at Naomi. "This is a new young lady. Future star, Mr. Fennell, sir?"

"No theatrical aspirations, as far as I know," Jerome replied with a smile. "This is Miss Thurrock, who is a sort of young cousin of mine. We've only recently discovered each other."

"Well, there now!" Joe looked impressed. "And I reckon you were pleased to discover such a cousin as Mr. Fennell, miss."

"She hasn't quite made up her mind about me yet," said Jerome, as Naomi hesitated for a fraction of a second. At which Joe, who evidently considered this a good joke, roared with laughter and went off into the house.

It was very quiet, sitting there in the car ,with the soft air blowing in through the open window, and Naomi started slightly when he said, "I suppose I was right in saying you had no theatrical aspirations?"

"Good heavens, of course! I couldn't go on a stage to save my life," Naomi declared fervently.

"There are few things one won't do to save one's life when it comes to the test," he replied, with an odd air of knowing something about that. "But we'll take it that you're not stage-struck."

"Whatever made you think I might be?"

"Most young women who thrust themselves upon me are," was the not very kind reply.

"I *didn't* thrust—Oh, you mean because I insisted on coming with you today. That wasn't anything to do with stage aspirations. I just wanted to—to put things right."

"Did you, Naomi?" He laughed, a little more kindly this time, and lightly touched her cheek, in that curious way he had once before. "Well, here comes our coffee now."

And, sure enough, Joe emerged once more, this time accompanied by a small, dark, lively young woman, both of them carrying trays on which there was not only steaming coffee, but delicious-looking home-made rolls and butter.

"You must have known I was baking today, Mr. Fennell." The girl smiled at Jerome in the same adoring way as Joe. "I was just taking them hot from the oven when Joe called that you were here."

"Just a lucky chance, Maggie." Jerome smiled as he took the tray from her. "My cousin here missed her breakfast, and I thought we should repair the omission here."

"Well, you know you're always welcome."

"The rolls are wonderful," Naomi exclaimed. "I didn't know one could get anything like this today."

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't waste them on the regulars." Maggie laughed and tossed her head. "But Joe likes them—and there's always some for Mr. Fennell or any of his friends, when I'm baking."

They spent a pleasant quarter of an hour over the meal—Joe staying to talk all the while and ask quite knowledgeably, Naomi

noticed, about theatre matters, while Maggie went in from time to time to inspect her next batch of rolls.

The atmosphere was of the friendliest, and only when Jerome went to pay for the breakfast was there an indignant outcry from both of them.

"Now, Mr. Fennell, sir, you wouldn't want to upset us, I'm sure," said Joe reproachfully. "But the day I took a penny piece from you Maggie would kick me into next week, and well I'd deserve it. So we won't talk any more about you owing us anything, or I might start reminding you of how much we owe you."

"Very well." Jerome laughed and bowed to what was evidently the inevitable. Then there were handshakes all round, and Naomi and Jerome drove off, followed by friendly farewell cries.

"What delightful people," Naomi exclaimed, as they swung back on to the open road again.

"Yes, Joe was my dresser when I was actually on the stage. When Maggie came along he wanted to marry her, but he wouldn't leave me—while she was a country girl who didn't want to live in town."

"How did they settle it, then?"

"I settled it for them." He made a slight face. "After my accident I—didn't need a dresser any more. They married and settled down in that little place you've just seen."

"They seem very fond of you." Naomi glanced at him curiously.

"There's no accounting for tastes," he said with a slight smile.

"I mean—they said they owed such a lot to you."

"They exaggerate."

"Goodness, one would think you were ashamed to be caught out in doing something nice!" Naomi exclaimed impatiently.

He laughed at that.

"Oh, no. I helped them to get settled in that place, if you must know. But it cost me only money, Naomi, and there's nothing easier to give, if you happen to have it, than money."

"I suppose you're right," Naomi said soberly. "I'd never thought of that." And then, after a long pause—"But it's nice of you to see it that way yourself."

"Thank you." He smiled slightly as he looked down the road in front of them.

The stop seemed successfully to have broken the long silence between them, and after a while she asked about the play she was to see him work.

"It's something between romantic and sophisticated comedy," he told her, "with a considerably larger cast than that usually implies. The final scene takes place at the Opera Ball in Vienna at the turn of the century. That gives one gorgeous costumes, of course, and the whole thing is a producer's dream—or nightmare, according to the state of his spirits at the moment."

Naomi laughed, in her turn.

"And do you have to tell everyone just what to do?—where to go?—how to speak their lines and so on?"

"Oh, dear me, no! I'm not that kind of producer," he assured her contemptuously. "That's all right for a film—or for a producer with a power complex."

"And you haven't got a power complex?" enquired Naomi innocently.

"Not in my work." He flashed her an unexpectedly bright glance. "But then I always know my material well. I insist on doing my own casting, down to the smallest part. And then, having obtained the people—the material—I want, I see it as my job to bring out everything that is in *them*. This I combine—manipulate—mould into the organic whole which is my production."

"And does it always work?" enquired Naomi respectfully.

He laughed a good deal at that.

"So far it has, Naomi. But no one ever feels entirely secure about the show which has not yet gone before the public. Ask me again after the first night."

"I will," Naomi promised lightheartedly, for his words seemed to suggest continuity in their friendship, and she found she liked the prospect very much.

By ten-thirty they were outside the stage door of the theatre, and he parked the car and ushered her in ahead of him.

Someone addressed as Bill came out of a little cubbyhole and said, "'Morning, Mr. Fennell. Miss Hersey's just phoned to say she's had to go to the dentist with a bad toothache, but she hopes to be here this afternoon.'

"Not until then?" Jerome frowned. "Who's going to take notes for me, then?"

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps Mr. Theodore's secretary—"

"Oh, no!" Jerome rejected that firmly, and then suddenly turned to Naomi. "Can you take notes intelligently?"

"T—take notes?" stammered Naomi. "I can't do shorthand, if that's what you mean."

"No. That isn't necessary. Can you listen attentively to what I say, and put down what I tell you in coherent form?"

"I could try." Naomi was divided between nervousness and a sort of elation.

"Very well, then. Come along and we'll make you useful."

He took her to what was evidently his office, found her a notebook and pencil, told her to keep her coat on, as it would probably be draughty on the stage, and then conducted her along several dreary stone passages to a large, open stage.

She was staggered to see the speed and purpose with which he moved in what was evidently his natural environment. He limped very noticeably, it was true, but as though he were suddenly unaware of the fact. And when they arrived at the stage, the several people who were scattered about it sprang to a sort of attention and chorused, "Good morning, Mr. Fennell."

A seat was found for Naomi on what appeared to be an overturned box, and almost before she had flicked open the notebook on her knee, the rehearsal had begun.

It was not like anything Naomi had ever seen before, because, of course, this was the first time she had seen a stage stripped of the glamor imparted by footlights, scenery and costumes. But there is sometimes almost more fascination. in what might be called the bare bones of a great art than even in the finished article, and Naomi was breathless with interest.

Particularly was she both moved and intrigued by the extraordinary transformation in Jerome. Instead of the moody, impatient, over-sensitive man she thought she was beginning to know, there was a purposeful, authoritative creature who took the large, dusty stage and the people on it, like a vital force—and, in some inexplicable way, made them his.

At first he came to Naomi's side from time to time and told her in some detail what he wanted noted down. But, after a while, he either became impatient of this process or decided to let her fend for herself. Anyway, he contented himself with shouting a few key words to her and leaving her to fill in the rest, with what intelligence and judgment she could muster.

It was an alarming experience, but it was curiously exhilarating too, so that Naomi lost all sense of time and was overwhelmingly surprised when a halt was called, and the subtle stage grouping dissolved into normal laughing, joking, arguing individuals once more.

Jerome stayed speaking to two of the leading characters for some minutes and then came across to where she was sitting.

"How are you getting on?" he enquired.

"All right—I hope."

He leaned over her—so close that she was suddenly aware of his nearness in a new and special and oddly disturbing way—and turned back a page or two of her notebook.

"Did I say that?" he enquired, indicating something on the second page.

"No. But I thought you meant it and that it would be a useful reminder."

"Quite right. That was quick of you," he said, and straightened up again as someone addressed him. But his hand remained on Naomi's shoulder, and she found herself so indescribably gratified by his word of praise that it was a few moments before she noticed the newcomer.

When she did, she caught her breath on a slight involuntary gasp—which was, if she had known it, the effect which Felicity Dene made on quite a number of people.

"You're late," Jerome said curtly.

"I know," was the studiedly casual reply. "I slept badly and got up late. I guessed you'd be running through the second scene first—and you don't need me for that."

"It isn't your business to guess my order of rehearsal." Jerome pressed his lips together.

"Oh, Jerry dear, don't be so stuffy!" Naomi could hardly believe that anyone was really addressing him in such terms. "You aren't number one box office draw nowadays, you know. I am." She gave him a lovely, diamond-bright smile. "You can do your sheepdog act with the others if you like—limping round, hustling them from pillar to post. But not me, Jerry. Not me."

She laughed softly and passed on, leaving Jerome white and wordless for a moment, his hand so agonizingly tight on Naomi's shoulder that it was all she could do not to cry out.

Then he muttered something—though whether he was apologizing to her or swearing at Felicity Dene Naomi was not sure—and turned away.

Within a few minutes the rehearsal was resumed. And this time Naomi had an opportunity of studying the stage personality of the girl who had caught Jerome on the raw with such pitiless and smiling accuracy.

Though Naomi thought her detestable, then and ever afterwards, she knew from the first that She was watching a great actress. It was not just that Felicity spoke exquisitely, moved beautifully and drew every last drop of meaning from both words and situation. In addition to all this, she had the quality which one sees only perhaps half a dozen times in one's life—where she stood, there was the natural centre of the stage.

She could stand with her back to the audience— she could lean negligently at the side of the stage and watch others—she could be still while others moved, be silent while others spoke—it made no difference. Drama flowed naturally outwards from *her*.

And for this, Naomi guessed, Jerome would put up with a great deal.

It was evident that they knew each other very well indeed. So well that Naomi guessed they had probably acted together in earlier day?. And between them there existed that curious mixture of antagonism and attraction from which the brightest flame is often struck.

At one o'clock Jerome dismissed everyone for lunch and took Naomi back to his office.

"Can you type?" he enquired.

"In a not very expert way."

"Very well. I'll take you to lunch now, and later you can type those notes for me. I'm afraid—" he gave a slight, grim smile—"I've worked you a good deal harder than Martin would have done if you had gone with him."

"I don't mind. I *liked* it," she declared, which seemed to amuse him and put him in better humor.

Over lunch, he was unusually talkative, drawing her out on her views about the morning's work and asking searchingly detailed questions with regard to her reactions.

Once he said impatiently, "No, no—you're oversimplifying things." But another time he nodded in apparent approval and said, "You have an accurate and observant eye," which made Naomi flush with pleasure.

"Do you rehearse again this afternoon?" she enquired.

"No. I have an appointment with the costume designer."

"Oh—That's where Antonia works, isn't it?" she said, as casually as she could.

"Yes." He did not offer to amplify that. So she drank her coffee in silence, and then he took her back to the theatre.

"You can take your time," he told her, when he had installed her in his office, with a typewriter in front of her. "I shall be away for an hour or more. I expect my secretary, Miss Hersey, will be in some time during the afternoon, but she works in her own outer office. When you're finished, do whatever you like, Telephone your mother or—"

"*Could* I telephone to Mother? But it would be a trunk call, you know, and rather expensive."

"Well, I daresay the bank will stand it." His glance was faintly indulgent, as well as amused. "But ask the operator the cost when you've finished. You'd better have the talk on me rather than the theatre."

"Oh, thank you!"

"But finish your work first."

"I will," Naomi promised. And, as soon as he had gone, she set to work and, after one or two false starts which caused her some chagrin and anxiety, she turned out the notes for Jerome, with a neatness and clarity which she hoped he would approve.

When she had finished, she sat for a few minutes at the desk, reviewing the events of the morning and wondering why his approval seemed of such immense importance all at once.

"It's nothing to do with liking him and wanting to please," she assured herself. "At least, that's only a small part of it. I suppose it's a sort of pride. He's so marvellous and inspiring at his own work that one doesn't like the idea of falling below the standard he sets. Even in a minor job like this, one feels it. Perhaps that's how he gets the best out of his actors and actresses too."

She read through her notes once more, with that tender solicitude which was lavish only on her first and valued job. Then, with a sudden uprush of spirit, she remembered his offer to let her telephone to her mother, at his expense and, reaching eagerly for the telephone, she asked for the familiar home number.

So much had happened since she had left home three days ago that, when her mother's voice replied, it was like hearing someone speak from another world.

"Oh, Mother, it's Naomi! How *wonderful* to speak to you!"

"Naomi?" Her mother's voice sounded both pleased and anxious, like someone who had painfully earned to associate the unexpected with disaster rather than good fortune. "My dear child, where are you? You sound so clear. You can't be speaking from Foley, surely?"

"No, from London. And everything is perfectly all right," Naomi hastily reassured her. "I'm getting on splendidly. I've just come to town for the day with Jerome and—"

"Who is Jerome?"

"*Jerome?*" All at once it seemed incredible to have to explain to anyone who Jerome was. Then she remembered that a few days ago she had not heard of him either, and she said—because there seemed no other way of describing him—"He's Mrs. Courteney's other son. And he's a famous producer and he said I could come with him to the theatre and see him at work. And so I'm here, and it's wonderful."

"What's wonderful?" Mrs. Thurrock sounded faintly puzzled.

"Well—everything. He's marvellous and—"

"Good gracious, Naomi, you haven't fallen for him, have you?" her mother interrupted sharply. "Stage people are never very stable or reliable."

"Oh, Mother, don't be ridiculous! Of *course* not. Whatever made you think such a thing?"

"Your tone of voice," her mother said simply. At which Naomi was completely silent for a moment, until her mother asked, "Are you still there?"

"Yes. But I don't know what you mean about the tone of my voice, Mother. It must be the effect of the distance or something. When I said Jerome was marvellous, I meant he's marvellous at his work."

"Oh," said Mrs. Thurrock without enthusiasm. "And what about the really important matter, Naomi? The reason for which you went to Foley. How do you get on with *her*, dear—and the other son—Martin?"

"Very well," Naomi asserted quickly. For, after all, she *had* got on very well with Martin until the flare-up on the previous evening. And, even if Mrs. Courteney thought her less civilized than Antonia, she seemed reasonably satisfied with her.

Besides, thought Naomi, with sudden amusement, if her mother only knew, Jerome was the key to the whole situation. And, even as she thought, this her mother's voice said, on a faintly conspiratorial note, "Naomi, has anything been said about—about your claim? I mean—do they pretend you're just there on an ordinary visit? or are they quite frank about it all?"

"Jerome was very frank—" began Naomi.

"What has *he* got to do with it?" interrupted her mother rather pettishly.

"Almost everything, as a matter of fact." Naomi laughed. "I really can't explain just now, Mother, but I'll write to you. The situation isn't as we thought—"

"Do you mean *he*—this Jerome—was the one who inherited?" With an inspired piece of guesswork— prompted by the dire necessity of getting things straight at last—Mrs. Thurrock leapt to the right conclusion with a speed and completeness which surprised Naomi, who had taken so much longer.

"Well—yes, Mother. That's the position."

"My dear child! And you say you're already getting on splendidly with him?"

"No. I said I was getting on splendidly with the others," said Naomi, in the interests of accuracy.

"Oh, never mind the others!" With characteristic ease, her mother had, Naomi realized, turned a mental somersault. "If Jerome is the important one, from our point of view, tell me all about him."

"I've told you all about him." Suddenly, even in her own thoughts, Naomi found herself becoming oddly shy and reticent. "He's a brilliant producer—"

"And you like him very much?"

"No, I don't think I do, to tell the truth. But he's a very interesting personality. Only I really can't talk much about him now, Mother. I'm in his office and someone who knows him might come in at any moment."

"You tiresome child!" Her mother sounded exasperated. "At first you couldn't talk of anyone else. Now, when I ask for details, you say you can't talk."

"Well, I can't." Naomi laughed. "But it's he who treated us to this expensive phone call, so you can chalk that up to his credit. As for the rest—I don't know, Mother. I enjoyed working for him—"

" *Working* for him?"

"I told you—he let me take notes for him."

"Oh, that." Her mother brushed off the note-taking in a way that pricked Naomi's newly acquired professional pride. Well, don't let him impose on you, dear—"

"I shouldn't," Naomi assured her crisply.

"I mean—when he's more or less living on *our* money—"

"Oh, Mother, he isn't! He's got loads of his own anyway."

"Then more shame to him that he took ours!" retorted Mrs. Thurrock indignantly.

"Well, it isn't quite like that," Naomi said hastily, for she had just heard someone come into the next room, and she felt that the development of the present argument might involve her in considerable difficulty. "Mother dear, I must go now. It's been simply lovely to talk to you, and I'll write soon."

"Yes, do, dear. And tell me all about Jerome."

"I will, I will," promised Naomi, rashly and not quite truthfully. And then she replaced the receiver and looked across expectantly at the half-open door into the outer office.

No one came in, however. Instead, she heard what was evidently the voice of Miss Hersey talking to Bill of the stage door. Then Bill said, "I was sorry about the toothache, Miss. Did you have to have *it* out?"

"No. That was just an invention." Miss Hersey sounded shockingly casual about that, Naomi thought. "I didn't have any toothache. I just had the morning off."

Bill chuckled.

"Better not let Mr. Fennell hear that," he remarked.

"On the contrary. The invention was Mr. Fennell's, though don't ask me why." There was a rustle of papers, as though Miss Hersey were looking for something on her desk. "He rang me up yesterday—from Foley. I couldn't imagine what he wanted on a Sunday afternoon. And he told me to take the morning off, but to telephone you before ten and say my piece about having to go to the dentist."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" said Bill. "Why did he do that, d'you suppose?"

"I haven't the faintest idea." Miss Hersey evidently believed in taking life as it came. "I never query the great man's orders. Just one of his crazy ideas, I suppose. I sometimes think he gets so enamored of his stage productions that he can't resist doing a bit of producing in real life. Who took notes for him at the rehearsal this morning?"

"Young lady he brought with him."

There was a slight silence, during which Naomi thought perhaps Bill gestured towards the half-open door to indicate her possible presence. Then Miss Hersey said, "Well, if she's any good, I wish he'd hang on to her. I do at least two people's work in this place and, as I told him last week, I'm getting a bit sick of it."

"If I was you—" Bill began.

But, whatever his great thought was, it was never put into words. For at that moment Jerome returned, passing rapidly through the outer office with a casual, "Toothache better, Miss Hersey?"

"Completely gone, thank you, Mr. Fennell," was the dry retort.

Then he came into his own office and shut the door behind him.

"Ah, you've finished, I see." He picked up the sheets of paper beside Naomi's typewriter, and, without even bothering to take off his coat, sat down at his desk and began to study them.

"Hm—hm—yes—" He made a slight alteration, which mortified her out of all proportion to the occasion, and she felt like a school child before an examiner—a sensation which annoyed her almost as much as it surprised her.

It didn't matter what he thought, she told herself. It was she who had been obliging him, wasn't it? And anyway, if Miss Hersey's story was correct, the whole thing was a silly sort of put-up job.

At that thought, both annoyance and anxiety were stamped in sheer curiosity. And, before she could stop herself, she asked, almost aggressively, "Why did you order Miss Hersey to have toothache this morning?"

"What's that?" He didn't even look up. And because she knew perfectly well he must have heard what she said, she had not the courage to repeat her question.

For perhaps a minute longer there was silence. Then he spoke at last. And what he said was, "How would you like to work for me, Naomi?"

CHAPTER FOUR

"W-WORK for you?" stammered Naomi, divided between alarm, astonishment and" a sort of indescribable elation. "But—I haven't any qualifications—any training."

"I'll train you," Jerome Fennell assured her, with faintly grim amusement. "And, if you stay the course, there won't be a producer in London who wouldn't be glad to have you as an assistant when I've finished with you."

"Oh," said Naomi, rather soberly. "That sounds almost threatening."

"It was meant to. It won't be an easy assignment," he told her carelessly. "But it's an opportunity in a thousand."

He said that without false modesty but, curiously, without conceit either. As though he were merely stating a fact. And, with absolute conviction, she knew that he was right, so that the surprise and alarm began to fade, and the elation to grow.

"Why do you want me?" she asked, with irresistible curiosity. "I mean—why *me*?"

"Because I think I can make of you what I happen to want. I told you, I have a flair for choosing my cast. Even my off-stage cast." Again he gave that faint, not very reassuring smile. "I'm pretty sure I'm right about you, even though you're completely inexperienced. Perhaps partly because of that," he added, with an air of dry reflection. "No one else has spoilt you yet with his own fool methods."

"And are you telling me you could judge all that on the strength of a few notes?" She gestured incredulously towards the pages which still lay in front of him on the desk.

"No, no." He laughed slightly. "Even I am not claiming such superhuman powers of deduction. But what do you think I have been doing all the weekend?"

"I—don't know."

"It didn't strike you that you were under observation most of the time?"

"Why, no! At least, only in so far as supposing that you were perhaps trying to decide whether or not I should be helped because of Uncle Enoch's—"

"Oh, that!" He interrupted her with a shrug. "That became of minor importance almost at once." Naomi felt glad her mother could not hear this conversation. "What interested me was you—as a person."

"O-oh," said Naomi, indescribably flattered, and trying to hide the fact under a decent cloak of polite attention.

"Naturally, I also had to have some sort of minor test of your reaction to day-to-day routine here. And so—"

"Miss Hersey had to have toothache?" suggested Naomi, with amused realization.

"Exactly."

"That was ingenious of you."

"Not really." He shrugged again. "Just a slight variation of an old trick. But it worked. If you had panicked and refused to help in an emergency—or if you had been floored by the way I left you to work some things out for yourself this morning—none of your other qualities would have counted."

Naomi resisted, with difficulty, the desire to ask about her other qualities, since an excessive degree of interest in them might have looked like conceit. Instead, she said slowly, "Then, as it is—you are offering me a job?"

"Yes."

"Working here with you, in the theatre—on some aspect of your work in which you really think you could train me to be—to be acceptable and self-supporting?"

To put it at its lowest—yes."

"Then I accept. Of course I accept!"

He gave a slight laugh, and looked at her in a keen, amused, almost curious way she could not quite understand. Then suddenly he held out his hand to her and said, "Come here, Naomi."

She came at once and put her hand into his, as she had that other time when she first saw him.

"What do you suppose your mother will have to say to this?" was the unexpected question he asked.

"I don't know. How do you mean?"

"She sent you to Foley Grange to acquire some proportion of the Uncle Enoch fortune, didn't she?— some share of what I suppose

one can only call easy money. What is she going to say if, instead of that, you return with nothing more than an offer of training and an interesting job?"

"I don't know," said Naomi again, thinking of her mother's crisp advice not to let Jerome "impose upon her." Only, somehow, this extraordinary offer kept on presenting itself as a dazzling opportunity and not at all as an imposition.

"I suppose," she murmured at last, "she'll be a good deal disappointed. And, in practical fact, the job, even in the training period will have to carry sufficient salary to keep us in modest comfort, I'm afraid.—Oh! and then, of course, there are the debts —" she was thinking aloud by now. "In a way, I've got to be able to *afford* to take this job. I'd forgotten about poor Mother, for the moment."

"But, in principle, you still want to accept?"

"Of course."

"Even though it will mean hard work, under a not very patient employer?"

"Yes, of course." She smiled, as she made the firm reiteration.

"You're a find, Naomi." He laughed, not entirely mockingly, and his fingers closed tightly on hers. "Either you're too innocent to be true, or you're the rarest discovery in this lazy and material-minded world—a worker who wants to work, and a dreamer with practical determination. Now let us talk about the other side of the proposition."

"What other side?"

"The Uncle Enoch part of the story, of course. You don't really suppose I'm going to leave you *to* tackle the job of telling your mother you've failed, from her point of view, do you?"

"I hadn't thought—about that."

"Well, think about it now." He sounded impatient as well as amused. "You're going to have to be a bit more worldly than this if you're going to survive in a pretty tough circle. I'm prepared to pay your mother's debts in full—"

"What?" gasped Naomi. "But you don't know how much they are."

"No. Do you?"

"No."

"I thought they had nothing to do with you, in spite of what you said." He seemed pleased with his own deduction. "You aren't the kind to get into debt, and it was naive of you to pretend you were partly responsible. But never mind that now. We'll put the matter right. Also I'll arrange for you both to have a flat or small house in London—whichever you prefer—and—"

"In London?" Naomi pushed back her hair with a bewildered little movement, for it seemed to her that this was top-speed production brought into real life. *Her* life.

"Yes, of course. I can't have you living on the south coast if you're working for me here," he pointed out impatiently.

"N-no, I suppose not. I hadn't thought of that. But it will be frightfully expensive living in London. That was one reason why we lived where we did."

"The running costs of the house or flat will be my affair," he stated almost carelessly. "And, since Uncle Enoch was certainly pretty stingy about your mother's annuity, suppose I treble that?"

"T-treble it? That would be six hundred a year," Naomi pointed out.

"Yes, I know. With rent, rates, heating and lighting taken care of, she ought to be able to manage on that. And your salary will be the same, while you're learning your job. Later—we'll see. How does the proposition strike you?"

Naomi swallowed.

"As incredibly generous." And suddenly she pulled her fingers away from his and covered her face with her hands.

"Good heavens, you're not going to cry about it, are you?" He sounded irritated, rather than sympathetic.

"No-no. I'm just—dazed." She drew her hands down as far as her cheeks and stared at him with widened eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

He shrugged.

"Because Uncle Enoch left an impossible situation which needed adjusting, I suppose," he said rather disagreeably. "There's no need to be emotional about it. I shouldn't be surprised if you find your mother expected more. She was probably thinking in terms of a large lump sum."

"Possibly. But that would never have done," Naomi exclaimed quickly. "She'd have spent the lot, you know, and then wondered where it had all gone."

"I rather gathered so. That's why I thought of this arrangement," he replied drily. "And you think this might work?"

"Might work? I think—I think—"

She could not find words for what she thought. Instead, on an impulse she could not explain even to herself, she leaned forward and kissed the thin, dark cheek that was nearest to her.

"Thank you," she said.

For perhaps half a minute he was absolutely still. Then he said shortly, "What's that for?"

"Just the final acknowledgment between you and me while we're still cousins in some degree, as your mother says. After this, we'll be employer and assistant—and it wouldn't be a very suitable way of expressing gratitude."

"How true." He stood up, with a faintly ironical little laugh. Then he put out his hand and drew her suddenly against him. "And how wise to take one's final opportunity," he added. And, bending his head, he kissed her full on her mouth.

. It was not at all the way she would have expected Jerome to kiss one—if she had thought about it at all. Something cool and light and mocking would have been more in character, to her way of thinking. And then she remembered suddenly that, the first time she had seen him, she had thought his face almost ascetic but his mouth faintly sensual. And, now that she had actually felt his lips on hers, she knew that that first impression had been right.

While these confused thoughts were coursing through her mind he was putting things together on his desk and, without looking up now, he asked curtly, "Are you ready?"

"Ready?" She felt—and perhaps looked—still slightly dazed.

"To go home. Back to Foley. We have a long drive, and I prefer to get out of town before the real rush begins."

"Oh, yes—yes, of course." She went to fetch her coat, which was hanging in the outer office. And there, for the first time, she came face to face with Miss Hersey.

"Hello." Miss Hersey was unexpectedly stout, pleasant and middle-aged. "I hear you stood in for me this morning."

"Yes—I did." Naomi spoke a little shyly, for she was not quite sure if she were supplanting Miss Hersey in some measure, or how that lady would take the situation if she were.

"Well," was the reassuring reply, "I hope it won't be the only time. Stage work isn't really my line at all, and I've plenty to do with the actual secretarial side of things. How did you get on?"

"I loved it," said Naomi, glad to be able to be candid. "And I think Mr. Fennell feels he can use me."

"Is that so?" Miss Hersey studied her, with shrewd, not unkindly attention. Then she said, "Do you mind taking a hint from an old-timer?"

"Why, no. Of course not. In fact, I'd be grateful," Naomi declared.

"Well, I'm all for hard work, and I've no patience with clock-watchers," Miss Hersey stated uncompromisingly. "But don't give your heart's devotion to any boss, my dear. Even the best of them isn't worth it."

"Oh!" Naomi was a trifle taken aback. "I wasn't thinking of doing so. That kind of devotion doesn't enter into it."

"No? Well, that's all right, then. But I've seen some very starry-eyed youngsters come and go, in my time. The theatre world is the home of crushes and adorations, you know. And few men can take that without becoming selfish brutes. Just remember that—and then work for all you're worth. You'll get on all right then."

"I'll remember," Naomi promised soberly.

And then Jerome appeared and, after signing a handful of letters, and telling Miss Hersey what he wanted done with a couple more, he took Naomi off downstairs, and out to the waiting car.

The drive back seemed longer than the morning drive. For one thing, it grew dark rather rapidly and, for another, Naomi had a great deal to occupy her thoughts.

Perhaps he had too, for he was silent for a good part of the way. Then she sighed involuntarily and he asked, "Are you tired?"

"A little."

"Well, it was an early start and a pretty exciting day, I suppose."

"It's a long drive too," she said. "Surely you don't do this every day?"

"No, of course not. I stay at my flat in town during the week and come down to Foley only at weekends. Not always then."

"You mean you're doing this long drive again just to take me home?" She turned her head and looked at him.

"You had to get home, my dear."

"Yes. But I could have gone by train."

"I preferred it this way," was all he said. "We still have several points to discuss."

"I suppose we have. For one thing—though I don't want to seem to cut my visit ungratefully short, I think the sooner I see Mother and explain the position to her, the better."

"I've been thinking that too. When do you propose to go?"

There were no graceful protests about her cutting short her visit of pleasure, she noticed. Rather more the implication that, since she had fulfilled the purpose for which she had come, she could depart at the first opportunity, so far as he was concerned.

She laughed a little. But, though he glanced at her enquiringly, she did not offer to explain. Instead she said, "Provided you explain the position to Mrs. Courteney, and make it clear that I'm not rejecting her hospitality, I can go any time. Tomorrow even."

"Make it the day after," he suggested, with an air of making a minor concession. "Then you can have your day at the coast with Martin."

"Oh—" She remembered Martin for the first time in hours. "He isn't going to like this arrangement, is he?"

"I can bear that," said Martin's brother indifferently. And Naomi supposed that she could too.

When it came to the point, however, Martin's reproachful protests were hard to resist.

He sought her out in the library, just before dinner, where she was relaxing in a chair before the fire and indulging in a blissful dream of hers as a valued assistant producer—right hand to Jerome, and the trusted friend and support of distinguished actors and actresses.

"What's this nonsense about your leaving the day after tomorrow?" he demanded, breaking in upon her golden, if hazy reflections.

"It's not nonsense, Martin." She smiled up at him, in a placatory way, but without much effect. "Hasn't Jerome explained? I'm going to work for him at the theatre, and he's making the most generous arrangements about Mother. We're to live in London and—"

"Naomi, do you *want* to do all this?" Martin looked down at her moodily. "What's come over you? I thought you were enjoying your stay here so much. I thought we were going to explore quite a lot around here, and that you wanted to come out with me and see the country and drive to the coast."

"I did—I mean I do, Martin. And I hope you'll be kind enough to take me tomorrow," she said earnestly. "But when you're offered a wonderful job—urgently—you can't indulge in a prolonged holiday or—"

"What sort of a job do you suppose this will be?" Martin flung at her contemptuously. "You'll just be Jerome's driven little dogsbody—bullied and shouted at, and handed all the tiresome, sticky, boring tasks he doesn't want to do himself."

This was a disconcertingly different picture from the one she had been conjuring up for herself, and Naomi blinked her long lashes once or twice at the unlovely prospect.

But she managed to say, with resolute dignity, "I think you exaggerate, Martin. I'm not expecting loads of glamor and excitement. But I do believe I'm being offered a fine opportunity to learn a fascinating job, under an expert. In addition, Jerome has been fantastically generous in his offer to help Mother and me out of the Uncle Enoch quandary."

"I suppose he used that as a pressure point when he was trying to get you to take on this rotten piece of slavery?"

"No, he did not. As a matter of fact, we had already—already—" she groped for the term— "come to an understanding about my working for him *before* he outlined any scheme for Mother."

"You mean," said Martin incredulously, "that you accepted this job without any pressure at all? Naomi, I simply don't understand you."

For a strange and frightening moment, she had the impression that she didn't understand herself either. It was like the opening and shutting of a door. But then the moment passed, and she said, "Martin, please don't be cross about it. I've loved being down here—and knowing you—and I hope you're going to take me out tomorrow, and perhaps see me sometimes in town. But the fact is that Mother and I have been in a very worrying position, and now everything looks like being solved almost miraculously. I know there'll be snags to the future arrangement. But there are snags to everything. One has to face life as it is—not as one would wish it to be. Don't try to spoil my pleasure and relief in what must be at any rate a partial solution of my difficulties. It isn't kind."

"Oh, darling—" Martin responded with immediate and generous good humor to this appeal— "I'm not trying to spoil your sense of pleasure and relief. I'm just being selfish, I suppose, because I'm

disappointed about your going so soon. But of course I'll take you out tomorrow—and of course we're going to see a lot of each other, even when you get to town. I just don't want to think that perhaps Jerome is exploiting your goodness and inexperience."

"Thanks for the generous implication," said his brother's voice drily, from the door. "Dinner's ready."

Then he limped away and there seemed little else to do but follow him.

Over dinner, Mrs. Courteney went through the polite motions of regretting Naomi's curtailment of her visit, but it was fairly obvious that it mattered hardly at all to her if Naomi went or stayed. Unlike her younger son, she had no feelings in the matter. But, unlike her elder son, she felt it incumbent on her to appear as though she had.

Once the conventions had been satisfied, however, she addressed herself to more interesting matters. As far as she was concerned, the waters had already closed over Naomi.

The person who really showed the liveliest and most approving interest in Naomi's day was Mrs. Sparks. The housekeeper came to her room once more, just as she had retired early to bed, and Naomi was delighted to see her.

"Oh, Mrs. Sparks, it all worked out splendidly!" Naomi sat up in bed and ruffled up her hair excitedly with both hands. "I'm so grateful to you for encouraging me to insist on going."

"Then he wasn't too angry with you?" The housekeeper smiled down at Naomi.

"Well—at first, perhaps. But he got over it. And I think he was quite approving, really. I don't think he likes people who give up easily."

"I'm sure you're right. He himself never gives up, when he has set his heart on something."

"N-no?—Anyway, I had a thrilling day. And I'm going to work for him. Isn't it wonderful, Mrs. Sparks?"

"Yes, I think perhaps that's the word." The housekeeper thoughtfully nodded her agreement. "You'll be good for Mr. Jerome."

"*Good* for him?" Naomi had not thought of the arrangement in that light. "Why should I be good for him?"

"Because you'll know when to give way to him and when to stand up to him, I think," Mrs. Sparks said.

"O-oh." Naomi lay back against the pillows and looked rather thoughtful. "I hope there won't be too much standing up to him involved. It could be a bit wearing, I imagine."

"You'll manage," Mrs. Sparks assured her, with an odd conviction. Then she went away, leaving Naomi to think that over.

The next day, Jerome had gone again before she was up. But he had left a brief and informative note for her, giving her his address and telephone number in London.

"Get in touch with me before the weekend," he had written, in his clear, decisive handwriting, "and let me know your mother's reactions, and the earliest date on which you can report for work."

Naomi was sorry to have missed him, But, since Martin was already making a persuasive bid for her attention, she contented herself with writing a few lines to her mother, telling her to expect her home the next afternoon, and then she gladly went out to enjoy herself for the day.

Once more February was masquerading as early May, and the sun shone with fugitive warmth, while occasional little fleecy clouds chased each other across an otherwise clear blue sky.

To Naomi, who possessed the inestimable gift of being able to give herself wholly to the present, it was an enchanting day. At the very back of her consciousness was the awareness of an exciting—possibly a demanding—future. But today was hers and Martin's, and she revelled in it.

The "coast" he had promised her proved to be an unexpectedly lovely stretch of the east coast, where the air was keener, clearer and far more exhilarating than anything Naomi had experienced in her small home-town. It lacked the mild, persuasive charm of the south perhaps, but the sharp, provocative tang in the air was definitely more in keeping with Naomi's present adventurous mood.

She was gay and co-operative over all Martin's suggestions for their mutual enjoyment, and not until they finally turned homewards and came in sight of familiar ground once more did she even allow herself the nostalgic reflection that this was something not likely to be repeated.

True, they would almost certainly meet in London—she felt sure Martin intended that they should—but she doubted if she would ever be asked to Foley again. Certainly not if the choice lay with Mrs. Courteney. For, courteous and polite though her hostess had

been, Naomi felt that never once had she got behind that cool exterior.

"She doesn't really like me," thought Naomi. "I'm just not civilized—like Antonia."

And just as she was turning that thought over, with mingled chagrin and amusement, Martin said, "I have to call in at the Vaynes', with a message from Mother. You don't mind, do you? It won't take ten minutes."

"Of course not."

But Naomi did mind. She would much rather not have had to see Antonia again. And, when they drove up the short path to the handsome, well-planned house where Antonia lived, she suggested that she should stay outside in the car, while Martin went in.

"Well—I don't know—" Martin began. But the matter was decided for them. The front door opened and Antonia herself came out to welcome them.

"You're just in time for tea," she declared. "And Father will be delighted to see you, Martin. He's been playing chess with himself all the afternoon, and that always bores him, because he never can decide if he's won a victory or suffered a defeat."

So they went in, and Naomi was introduced— perhaps presented was more the word—to a tall, fine-looking man in his early sixties, who obviously thought the world—or that part of it which mattered —revolved around his attractive daughter.

He immediately engaged Martin in conversation, so that Naomi—a little unwillingly—was left to Antonia. However, there was no slightest hint of the hostility which had marred their previous

meeting, and Antonia seemed genuinely interested in Naomi's account of her day with Martin.

Only when she enquired about the length of Naomi's stay, and she found that she was leaving on the morrow, did Antonia look oddly still and thoughtful. And that was because Martin turned and said across the room.

"Yes, did you ever hear anything like it?—Jerome took Naomi up to London yesterday, dazzled her with some of his best stage tricks, and persuaded her to go and work for him there."

"You're going to work—for Jerome—in London?"

Naomi suddenly saw the other girl's well-shaped fingers curl inwards on the arm of her chair.

"Yes." Naomi hoped she sounded more cheerfully casual than she felt. "The offer was quite unexpected. But it was much too good for me to refuse."

"Did you think of refusing at first, then?"

"Oh, no! That was just a manner of speaking. No, certainly not. I very much like the idea of working for Jerome."

"Hra—" Antonia seemed to give that her friendly consideration. Then she said, "I wouldn't if I were you." And, for all the quietness of her tone, Naomi felt that same hostility prickling in the atmosphere again.

"Why not?" Resolutely she looked Antonia in the eye.

"I think—there must be other jobs, where you would be happier—and less likely to make bad enemies."

"There you are, Naomi!" Martin laughed. "Antonia knows a lot about that world. She even comes in contact with Jerome quite often in her own work. And her advice is against accepting. You'd better think again."

"I have no intention whatever of thinking again," Naomi stated quite pleasantly, though without a moment's pause. "My mind is made up. And as for making enemies—one can do that in any line of business, I imagine. One just has to learn to—deal with' them. You know, Martin, we ought to be going or we shall be late home."

Martin got up at once, though obviously a little surprised at being hustled off, since their time was entirely their own. Goodbyes were said, in an atmosphere of conventional cordiality but indefinable chill, and Naomi and Martin returned to the car.

As they drove away, and before they were out of sight of the house, he asked curiously, "What happened?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you girls were as sweet as honey to each other, but there was a distinct whiff of fire and brimstone at the end."

Naomi laughed shortly.

"She was warning me off," she said drily.

"Off what?"

"Why, she doesn't want me to work for Jerome. Not because of anything to do with *my* welfare. That doesn't interest her—and there's no reason why it should, to be honest. But she thinks he's

her property, and she prefers him to be surrounded by nice, comfortable, middle-aged people like Miss Hersey."

"Afraid of competition, eh?" Martin rubbed his chin reflectively and looked amused.

"One could put it that way. And, ridiculous though the idea is—I mean the idea that I should try and compete with her over Jerome—I'm certainly not taking orders from her."

"You made that clear," Martin said, not without enjoyment.

"I'm glad," Naomi retorted crisply. And Martin chuckled as they turned in past the gatehouse of Foley.

The evening was uneventful and the next morning, after she had bade Mrs. Courteney a polite and grateful farewell, Naomi drove to the station with Martin.

She was a little sad, now that the moment of departure had come, and he looked more nearly depressed than she had seen him look so far.

"Do you come fairly often to London, Martin?" she enquired, as they walked up and down the short platform, waiting for the train.

"I shall now," he told her with a slight smile, and she slipped her hand round his arm, on a friendly impulse.

"Thank you," she said. "And thank you for being so kind and hospitable to me. You gave me a lovely time and showed me some wonderful places."

"I'd have shown you more, if you had stayed."

"But I couldn't—and we're not going to argue over that, you remember. I'm sorry I had those few words with you about—about Jerome and my going to London."

"You're not a bit sorry," he retorted, patting the hand which lay on his arm. "You got your own way—and that's all you girls care about. I only hope you won't be sorry later."

"I'm sure I shan't," Naomi declared, as the train came puffing round the curve and jerked to a standstill in the station. "Goodbye—for the time being, Martin."

"Goodbye." He lifted her case into the compartment for her and then turned and kissed her. "And remember this—If Jerome is the one with the brains and the money, I'm the one with a heart."

"Oh, Martin, I'll remember!"

She felt a slight catch in her throat as she stood at the open window, looking down at him. Then the train began to move slowly out of the station, with that irresistible air of finality peculiar to station partings.

Naomi leaned from the window and waved for as long as she could see Martin's tall figure on the platform. Then when she could no longer see even the bright touch of sun on his fair head, she pulled up the window and sat down in her corner seat.

The great, the eventful visit to Foley was over.

Nothing of interest happened on the journey to London. But, when she changed from one terminus to another, she had the absurd conviction that she would surely see Jerome somewhere. Naturally, no such encounter took place, and the second half of her journey proved as uneventful as the first.

It was halfway through the afternoon when she finally arrived at her own station and, indulging in the luxury of a taxi, she drove to the familiar little house from which she had set forth—was it really only days ago?—with such high hopes and deep anxieties.

"Darling child, what happened?"

Her mother rushed to greet her on the threshold, full of mingled joy and apprehension over her early return.

"Nothing happened—if you mean that in the disastrous sense." Naomi hugged and kissed her mother. "But everything was—settled, and it did seem best to come home and start on the practical arrangements at once. Wait till I get my things off, Mother, and I'll tell you everything."

But it was quite beyond Mrs. Thurrock to do any waiting at this point. She followed Naomi upstairs, and sat on the bed in her daughter's little room, while Naomi took off her hat and coat, brushed her hair, powdered her nose and rapidly outlined—at one and the same time—Jerome's plans for their future.

Even as she did so, it occurred to Naomi that the whole thing sounded much more fantastic and improbable than it had when Jerome detailed his suggestions, in his office at the theatre. And, at the end, she gave a half nervous little laugh and said, "It's difficult, even now, to believe that I'm actually to go and work for him."

"Why does he want to do it this way?" Her mother looked dissatisfied. "Why not just hand over a portion of Uncle Enoch's fortune—which is what he *should* do—and leave us to get on with our own lives?"

"I suppose he—he thought it better this way. And anyway, he wants me to work for him, and so it does mean our living in

London. Will you mind that, Mother?" She looked at her mother anxiously.

"No. Not for myself. To. live, rent free, in London, with a reasonably generous allowance, is more or less my idea of heaven," said Mrs. Thurrock, with simple candor. "But I can't help asking myself—why does he want to go to all this bother, just to have you work with him? In his position he could have had anyone."

"Oh, Mother, you're not very flattering to me and my value in the professional world!" Naomi laughed. "Couldn't it just be that he really thinks I *am* just what he wants?"

"It could." Mrs. Thurrock looked sceptically at her daughter. Then, after quite a long pause, she said, "You've changed in some way."

"Changed? How do you mean?"

"I'm not quite sure."

"It's just that you haven't seen me for a few days," Naomi declared, with a laugh, and she gave her mother another quick kiss. "Is it nice to have me home?"

"Lovely," said her mother absently. "Naomi, which of the two brothers did you like better?"

"Oh, Martin, I think." Naomi spoke quickly. "Yes—Martin, of course. He's much the easier to get on with. Gay and kind and full of good humor. You'd like him. But why do you ask?"

"Because—as I said—you've changed in some way. And when a girl of your age changes it's usually because of a man. I wondered which one, that's all."

"Oh, darling, don't be *absurd!* I'm exactly the same as I always was," Naomi declared. "And don't you think it's time we had some tea now?"

"Yes, of course." Her mother got up. "I'll go and put the kettle on."

"And I'll do a little unpacking. I shan't be long," Naomi promised.

But, the moment her mother had gone, she went to the small dressing-table by the window and looked at herself in the mirror.

Had she changed? And, if so—why?

The same violet blue eyes, looked back thoughtfully at her. The same soft red mouth seemed ready to curve upwards in a smile. There was the same rather determined line to cheek and chin—the same unruffled smoothness of brow. And yet—

"When a girl of your age changes it's usually because of a man," her mother had said. "I wondered which one, that's all."

Well then, it was Martin, of course. Only a few hours ago he had kissed her and told her he was the one with the heart.

Naomi stared almost defiantly at her reflection, as though daring the girl who looked back at her to suggest anything else.

Then she saw a faint veil of reserve cloud the eyes which returned her stare. Neither the color nor the actual expression changed. Only, subtly, inexplicably, they had become the eyes of someone who had something to hide—perhaps even from herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

DURING the greater part of that evening Naomi and her mother discussed various aspects of the promising future. And, since Mrs. Thurrock was an inveterate and enthusiastic planner, she at least enjoyed herself immensely.

Unlike most women of her age, she had no wish to cling nostalgically to the familiar past and present. She was simply delighted to feel that big changes were about to take place. And, though it was true she would have much preferred to handle a _ large slice of Uncle Enoch's fortune without restriction, since this was denied her, she was very willing to speculate enjoyably on the many possibilities contained in the limits laid down by Jerome.

"I've always been something of a gipsy," she declared, which was not at all true but sounded attractively dashing to her own ears. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to all the changes, Naomi. How soon do you suppose Jerome Fennell proposes to arrange our move?"

"I don't know." Naomi smiled almost indulgently at her mother. "He said I was to find out your reaction, and then to let him know the earliest date I could start work for him."

"Well, you know my reaction," her mother pointed out. "I'm ready and willing to move to London whenever he likes. It's only a question of finding accommodation. And, since he's making that his business—and his purse is obviously a long one— I see no reason for any delay. In fact—" she looked pensive for a moment, and then asked, "Have you his telephone number?"

Naomi admitted that she had.

"Then you know what I'd do, dear." Mrs. Thurrock's eyes shone with almost childlike excitement and eagerness. "I'd telephone him—now."

"But, Mother, it's ten-thirty and—"

"Nothing to a theatre man," declared Mrs. Thurrock, with the airy assurance of one who had spent half her life on the far side of the footlights.

"No, I know. But I left Foley only this morning. I think he would expect us to give at least twenty-four hours' reflection to such a major change in our lives.

"Why?" asked her mother simply.

Naomi really did not know why. Only she felt there was something vaguely pushing and irresponsible about quite such a hasty acceptance.

To her mother, however, there was only one time to act, provided the situation was to her liking—and that was at once. And, since she never lacked arguments to buttress her wishes, she rapidly demolished Naomi's objections and pretty well led her to the telephone.

There was quite a long delay after Naomi had given the number and, as she sat there in silence, it seemed to her that she could hear her heart beating with something more than its natural urgency.

Then, unexpectedly, a woman's clear, singularly well-pitched voice said, "Killigrew four-three-double-four."

"Could I—could I speak to Mr. Fennell, please?"

"I'll see. Who is it?"

"Naomi—Miss Thurrock."

"Just a moment." Then, without even bothering to cover the mouthpiece of the telephone at the other end, the owner of the clear voice said negligently, "Someone called Naomi wants to speak to you, Jerry. Are you at home?"

And, as she heard this casual version of Jerome's name for the second time, Naomi suddenly realized why the voice had sounded familiar. It was Felicity Dene who was answering from Jerome's flat. Though what she should be doing there at this hour, answering his telephone calls for him, she simply could *not* imagine.

Then Jerome's voice said, on a note of faint surprise, "Naomi? Is that you?"

"Yes. I—I hope I'm not disturbing you."

She knew this was an idiotic and ill-chosen remark, the moment she had voiced it. Perhaps he thought so too, for his tone sounded dry as he replied, "Not in the least. What is it?"

"Mother's delighted with all your suggestions—" Mrs. Thurrock made a slight downward movement of her hand at this, as though to indicate that Naomi should play down the enthusiasm a little, but Naomi was wound up to say what she had arranged in her own mind. "I can come to you—to work for you, I mean—as soon as you like."

"Good." There was a slight pause, as though he were thinking that over. Then he said, "I'll come down to see you and your mother

tomorrow afternoon, Naomi. It's easier and quicker to discuss things in person than by letter. Will three o'clock be all right?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course," Naomi assured him, though she was really extremely put out at the thought of Jerome here, in this house, subjected to her mother's barrage of reproaches, suggestions and thinly veiled requests.

However, she could not have imagined herself saying "No" to him, and apparently nor could he. Because there was hardly time for her agreement before he said, "Very well, then. Around three tomorrow. Thanks for ringing. Goodnight." > "Goodnight," Naomi replied. But she found she was speaking to the telephone only. He had already rung off his end.

"Well, dear?" Her mother looked expectant. "Is everything—all right?"

"I think so. He seemed satisfied that we had made up our minds so quickly. He's coming down here tomorrow, Mother, to get everything settled."

"Here?" Her mother thrust out her underlip, in a rather dissatisfied sort of way. "I don't know that I want him *here*."

"Why not?" asked Naomi, who didn't want him there either, but for reasons somewhat different from her mother's, she supposed.

"We-ell, I shouldn't want him to suppose that we would be satisfied with poky accommodation like this." Mrs. Thurrock glanced disparagingly round upon the accommodation in which she had lived for a large part of her life. "After all, one has *standards*. We don't want to give him the wrong ideas."

"I don't imagine Jerome is coming down here to get ideas," Naomi said drily. "If I know him, he is coming to state intentions. But he's not an ungenerous man, Mother. Leave it to him. I think you'll be satisfied."

"No man has ever been the worse for a little prompting in these matters," retorted her mother with disquieting, if smiling, determination. "Though, of course, he must be used to doing things on a pretty satisfactory scale for himself. Has he got a manservant, Naomi?"

"I have no idea." Naomi looked surprised. "How should I know?"

"Well, who replied, dear? You spoke to someone before you got through to him. Was it a manservant?"

"Oh—no. That wasn't a servant at all. That was Felicity Dene, the actress."

"How do you know?" asked her mother curiously.

"I'd know the way she speaks—anywhere," Naomi said, half to herself.

"And what was she doing in his flat at this time of night?" added Mrs. Thurrock, as a matter of interest rather than morals, for she prided herself—not quite accurately—on being broadminded.

"She didn't say," replied Naomi, with unusual sarcasm, because the simple query rasped her nerves in some inexplicable way. "I suppose," she added, seeing her mother's surprised glance, "that she'd been dining with him or something and stayed to discuss work. She acts in the play he is directing, you know."

"Is she good?" asked Mrs. Thurrock, pursuing a subject Naomi found herself longing to drop.

"Terrifyingly good," replied Naomi tersely.

"Darling, what a funny way of putting it!" Her mother laughed and raised her eyebrows.

"Well, she's not at all a nice person." Naomi's voice shook slightly, as she recalled the odious thing Felicity had said to Jerome—and yet she was there now, in his flat. "But she's so gifted that the world is her oyster. It's a frightening combination. That's all I meant."

"Well, well—" Mrs. Thurrock, whose interest invariably returned soon to her own affairs, dismissed Felicity Dene with amiable indifference and once more took up the pleasing pursuit of variations on the theme of the future.

Naomi supported her gallantly, as far as she was able. But *she* could not dismiss Felicity with indifference, amiable or otherwise. She kept on hearing that lovely, half mocking voice in her ear. And it seemed to pursue her when she went to bed, and even into her dreams.

The next day Naomi and her mother gave the house a very special polishing and tidying. And when everything was ready Mrs. Thurrock looked round with some degree of satisfaction and said, "At least he will see we like to have things nice. Besides, a well-run house always *soothes* a man, and we may as well have him in as good a humor as possible. Is he a big, blustery sort of man, Naomi?"

"Oh, no! Whatever gave you that idea?" exclaimed Naomi.

"Well, you sounded almost timid when you spoke to him on the phone. And, though you obviously find him attractive, I think you're a little bit afraid of him too."

"I'm not in the least afraid of him!" declared Naomi, quickly and not quite truthfully. "And there's certainly nothing big and blustery about him. He's thin and rather elegant—except that— he's lame, Mother."

"Lame? Noticeably so, do you mean?"

"It's very noticeable when he's tired."

"Poor boy," said Mrs. Thurrock who, for all her flightiness, was genuinely kind-hearted. And, although to Naomi this seemed an incongruous way of describing Jerome, she laughed and hugged her mother suddenly for her sympathy.

Then Jerome arrived, not looking at all as the term "poor boy" might suggest.

He came in very much as he came into the theatre, taking possession of the scene by natural right. And, when Naomi rather nervously introduced him to her mother, he immediately made himself so charming that Mrs. Thurrock forgot how she had meant to make it clear, right from the beginning, that she knew her rights and was not to be trifled with.

To Naomi it seemed that his handling of her mother was little short of masterly. Almost before Mrs. Thurrock realized it, he had passed from pleasant generalities to exact particulars and—with and astringent realism which never even bordered on brutality—he extracted the real amount of her debts from her without embarrassment.

It was all so different from the way Uncle Enoch used to do things. He showed neither surprise nor horror that she had wandered so far outside the natural limits of her income, and before Mrs. Thurrock could even begin to justify herself—which she was prepared to do in detail—he said, "I'm sorry to appear so inquisitive about your private affairs, but I'd like everything straightened out before you start life in London. It will be much pleasanter for you and much simpler for me."

"Yes, of course—" Mrs. Thurrock agreed to this with fervor. "You're being most kind—most generous—" she seemed almost ready to cry with relief and surprise at the discovery that she was not being called on either to apologize or explain. "But Naomi told me that you were."

Naomi had not said anything about his being kind, of course, but she could hardly insist on accuracy at this moment. As it was, Jerome himself queried the statement—with that sudden, brilliant smile, which appeared only on the rare occasions when he was genuinely amused or genuinely anxious to please.

"Naomi overestimated me," he declared. "I'm not at all kind by nature. And, as for generosity- it's easy enough to be generous if you have the means."

"How true!" Mrs. Thurrock was with him there. "But few wealthy people see it that way. Uncle Enoch, for instance—"

"Well, we hope to readjust Uncle Enoch's ill-balanced arrangements," Jerome said. "Do you want to live in a house or a flat in London, Mrs. Thurrock?"

"I—I hardly know," stammered Mrs. Thurrock, who had never, since her husband's death, been consulted about her wishes in such a matter. Uncle Enoch's way was to tell one grudgingly what he

had arranged. "I don't—really—mind," she added, to the great astonishment of Naomi, who had expected her mother to be embarrassingly exact and firm about what she considered to be her just dues.

There was silence for a moment—perhaps an astonished silence on his part—while Mrs. Thurrock absently twisted her hands together, like an embarrassed child in a toyshop, bewildered by an almost frighteningly glorious choice.

"Mother—" Naomi prompted a little anxiously. But her mother just shook her head.

Then Jerome did a surprising thing. He leaned forward and took the restless hands in his and said quite gently, "Mrs. Thurrock, just think for a moment. I expect you have some sort of preference, and I'd like you to have what would make you happy."

"Whatever you arrange—would be nice—I'm sure," replied Mrs. Thurrock, and she began to *cry*.

"Mother!" Naomi was thunderstruck. While Jerome turned to her and said, "I'm sorry—have I said something that's upset her?"

"N-no," sobbed Mrs. Thurrock, answering for herself. "It's just that you're so *nice* about it all, and not a bit censorious about the debts, and really caring about where we live, instead of just making it as cheap as possible—I didn't know anyone ever thought or behaved like that."

"But—I've told you—" he protested almost troubledly—"I can well afford to do it."

"So could Uncle Enoch," retorted Naomi's mother. "But it would have hurt him physically to part with five shillings unnecessarily.

And yet— isn't life strange?"—she dropped her hands and frowned—"he lived in meanness and good health for over ninety years, while you—"

"Mother!" exclaimed Naomi for the third time, but on a note of frightened warning now.

Jerome silenced her, however, with a quick movement of his hand.

"Let her finish," he said curtly. "Yes, Mrs. Thurrock? While I—"

"You're generous and sensitive and young—and lame."

Naomi caught her breath on a frightened little gasp, and she thought she heard him draw in his breath sharply too. But her mother—with a naive and uninhibited candor all her own —went on wonderingly.

"It seems so unfair. I think that was partly what made me cry."

Naomi wished she could think of something light and casual to say. Something which would restore normality to this conversation. But it was *Jerome* who spoke at last—half to himself. And what he said, very softly, was—

"My God! She cried—partly because I'm lame—"

That was the moment when Naomi felt the tears come into her eyes. But, as it would have been ridiculous for them both to cry, she turned hastily away. At the same time, Mrs. Thurrock, with her magnificent capacity for remaining unaware of tension, cleared her throat, smiled engagingly upon *Jerome* and said, "Well, since we're very willing to accept whatever you suggest, suppose you tell us your plans. Or haven't you really made any?"

He laughed at that—on a note of real gaiety which Naomi could not recall having heard in his voice before.

"Oh, yes," he assured her. "I've made plans all right—based, I'm afraid, on my own selfish wishes. I'd like to have you and Naomi store the furniture from this place—I take it the house doesn't belong to you?"

"Oh, *no*." Mrs. Thurrock sounded almost shocked at the notion that Uncle Enoch might actually buy a house for one.

"Well then, would you consider storing the furniture and coming to London immediately? I can put you into a furnished flat in the block where I live. That will give you time to look round for just what you want—and mean that Naomi can start work at the theatre next week. Agreed, Naomi?" He turned to look at her.

"Yes, of course." She had recovered herself by now, and was able to smile absolute agreement. While Mrs. Thurrock declared that nothing—absolutely nothing—would be easier than to pull up their roots and start off forthwith.

He seemed amused, as well as satisfied, by the eagerness of their co-operation. And, over tea—

which Mrs. Thurrock insisted on his having—he checked over the final details.

They were to do their personal packing in the next two or three days and move by the weekend to the flat he would have available for them. Meanwhile, he would arrange for a London firm to store the furniture, and Mrs. Thurrock could return for the day and superintend this move or not, as she wished.

"Naomi will already be busy," he declared., "I'll expect you at the theatre at nine-thirty on Monday morning, Naomi."

"I shall be there," she promised.

He stayed only a little while after that. Then, having mentioned almost casually that the first quarter of Mrs. Thurrock's allowance would be paid into her account on the morrow, he went away, with the air of a man who had other pressing matters to attend to.

With him went that extraordinary sense of limitless possibilities with which he had invested the whole of their discussion, and for several minutes after he had gone, Naomi and her mother were silent. Then Mrs. Thurrock said, "Nothing you had told me gave me any idea of what he would be like. I expected something quite different."

"In what way, Mother?"

"I don't quite know. I expected he'd be a *type*, somehow. But he's not, of course. He's unique."

There were other things one could have said about Jerome, Naomi supposed—other qualities which she had left unmentioned and which her mother had, with astonishing acumen, discovered. But perhaps nothing would have summed him up better than those few words. "He's not a type. He's unique."

Naomi thought of this often during the next few days while, at Jerome's instigation, all the roots of the past were drawn up and she and her mother prepared to transplant themselves to a completely different life. Sometimes she tried to remember that it was only a week since she had gone to Foley— only a week since she had known of Jerome's existence.

But all she was doing made nonsense of that. Jerome, for good or ill, had become the driving force of their present life.

When they finally shut the door on their small, familiar house for the last time, Mrs. Thurrock was already full of joyful anticipation. But Naomi had the most terrible feeling of casting adrift on an unknown sea.

It was over—that long, uneventful, pleasantly safe period which had comprised her growing-up years. At the almost lightly expressed wish of a man she had known only a week, she had tossed all that aside. In a sudden moment of panic, she decided they were being absolutely mad, she and her mother. Suppose she could not satisfy Jerome in her work? Suppose he proved impossibly difficult? Suppose they hated living where he proposed to put them? Suppose—

But the door had closed, literally and figuratively. It was no good supposing anything now. She could only go on to whatever the new life offered.

It was the middle of the afternoon when, after a pleasant and uneventful journey, Naomi and her mother finally arrived at the block of flats where Jerome lived and where they were now to make their own home.

The place looked quiet and elegant rather than aggressively luxurious, and a respectful porter took possession of their luggage, conducted them to the lift and took them up to the top floor.

"Mr. Fennell left the keys with me, Madam," he informed Mrs. Thurrock. "He's gone to the country for the weekend, but he said I was to see after everything you wanted. If you ring the bell by the lift, I'll come up any time, and the night porter has the same instructions."

Then he opened the door, carried in their luggage and deposited it in the small hall and, having handed over the keys, left them to inspect their new home.

It was a charmingly furnished place, with two bedrooms, an unexpectedly large and lovely sitting room, with a dining recess, a small but wonderfully well equipped kitchen, and a grey and rose bathroom which sent Mrs. Thurrock into ecstasies.

"This, more than anything else signifies, the change," she declared, sitting down on the side of the pink tiled bath and lovingly fingering the silvery plastic shower curtains. "I so hated that crack in our washbasin at home, and the patch in the bath where the enamel had worn off, and the fact that it was always arctic in winter and like the Sahara in summer. Oh, Naomi, this is what I *call* a bathroom!"

No little girl with her first dolls' house could have been more blissfully enchanted than Mrs. Thurrock with her luxury flat. She wandered round, examining the furniture—and pricing quite a lot of it, with artless pleasure and remarkable accuracy. She turned the taps on and off in the bathroom. And she gazed in rapture from the wide windows, across St. James' Park to the towers of Westminster.

"I can't imagine what he must be paying for this," she said happily. "He must be very wealthy to be able to afford to put us here, just for a whim."

"A *whim*, Mother!" Naomi found that she very much disliked the word in connection with Jerome. It seemed to imply something frivolous and impermanent, and that was not at all the relationship she wanted between them. What she did want she was not quite

sure, it was true. Only she knew that she hated the word "impermanent".

"Well, he could have taken his time about it all, and found us somewhere very nice but not in the real luxury class," Mrs. Thurrock explained. "I'd call it something of a whim, to want to have you in his office with so little delay that he took this place, to make it possible."

"I don't think it was a whim," Naomi insisted obstinately. "For some reason, he really thinks I'll be a great help to him. And I will! With everything I've got I'm determined to be some sort of justification for all this generosity."

"Quite right, dear," said her mother, absently but approvingly, and then she settled down to enjoy her weekend.

She was less enthusiastic on Monday morning, when it became obvious that Naomi's part in the spree was over, and that she must now really address herself to the mundane matter of earning her living and justifying Jerome's choice of her. But the thought that she could, for the first time in her life, go out shopping with a bank balance which justified the expedition" cheered Mrs. Thurrock immensely.

"It's so lovely to think of being able to buy without feeling guilty," she declared to Naomi—a sentiment to strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of most of us.

"Don't indulge that lovely feeling too far," Naomi warned her with a laugh.

Then she went off to the theatre, telling herself there was really no need to feel nervous—only conscientiously concerned about her job.

The first person she encountered—once she had passed the scrutiny of Bill at the stage door—was the reassuring Miss Hersey, who welcomed her kindly and showed her where a desk had been placed for her in a corner of Jerome's own office.

"Not that you'll have a great deal of straightforward office work," Miss Hersey said. "Most of that falls on me. Nearly all your time will be spent on the stage, or with the costumiers, or in the workshops where they build the scenery and so on. You're pretty new to this sort of thing, aren't you?" She glanced at Naomi curiously.

"Absolutely," Naomi admitted frankly, for she saw no point in pretending to a knowledge she did not possess, particularly with anyone so obviously experienced and clear-sighted as Miss Hersey.

"Hm—I wonder why he chose you." Miss Hersey looked thoughtful.

"Mm—I have wondered myself once or twice," Naomi said. At which Miss Hersey laughed.

"He's an odd man, Mr. Fennell, and does the most unpredictable things. But the oddest thing of all is that what he does almost always works. He won't be in for half an hour yet, so if—"

"If you don't want me to do anything for you," Naomi interrupted quickly, "could you please find me a copy of the play? I've seen two scenes in rehearsal, but that's all I know about it, except that it's called 'Till Tomorrow'."

So Miss Hersey obligingly supplied her with a manuscript copy of "Till Tomorrow" and left her to her own devices. And, sitting

down at her new desk, in Jerome's quiet office, Naomi became immersed in the play.

Though she was not herself aware of it, Naomi possessed one of the rarest of all qualities—that of absolute concentration—and during the next half-hour only the play mattered to her.

Even in print it seemed to her good. But, as she read over the two scenes she had seen put on the stage, she realized immediately how pointed and significant they had become in expert hands. Not only did she gain a considerable insight into the way Jerome worked. She also realized, with reluctant admiration, how skilfully Felicity Dene had filled out the character of the heroine.

"She was the obvious—almost the inevitable— choice for the part," Naomi thought. "No wonder he insisted on having her, whatever the private situation between them."

And then, even as she arrived at that conclusion, Felicity herself came unexpectedly into the room— not through Miss Hersey's office, like other people, but directly from the corridor, through a door marked quite distinctly, "Private. No Admittance."

"Hello—where's Mr. Fennell?" she enquired.

Naomi explained politely that he was due at any minute now, and, having looked her over, Felicity said, quite agreeably, "You're Naomi, aren't you? Jerome's new find."

It was difficult to decide whether she meant that mockingly or literally. So Naomi smiled, as though it were something of a joke, and said, "I don't think he would describe me quite like that."

"But he did describe you just like that," retorted the other girl, which startled Naomi into exclaiming, "*Did* he? When?"

"When I asked him about you—the evening you telephoned."

"O-oh," said Naomi, trying to hide her extreme gratification. "Then I must do my best to justify that."

"He'll give you hell if you don't," Felicity assured her carelessly. "He hates to be proved wrong. You stayed at Foley, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Naomi, without amplification, because she had the feeling that this attractive, oddly dangerous girl was trying to "pump" her.

"And met Antonia What's-her-name, who's trying to marry him?"

"I met someone called Antonia Vayne," Naomi admitted, in as matter-of-fact a tone as she could manage.

" 'Someone called Antonia Vayne'!" Felicity repeated the words, with a mocking inflection which made them sound faintly prim, and she laughed. "She won't get him, of course," she added casually.

"No?" Naomi was divided between anxiety to avoid any appearance of gossiping and a sudden and almost uncontrollable desire to ask Felicity on what she based this belief.

"She's too obvious," Felicity went on contemptuously. "Simple people—" her glance travelled over Naomi thoughtfully—" and obvious people don't really interest Jerome, even now. He likes them provocative and unusual."

She paused, and Naomi said, "Does he?" since there seemed nothing else to say and a silence would be even more embarrassing than comment.

"Yes. That's why, although he sometimes hates me—" Felicity sounded almost complacent about that—"in a way, he can't ever quite get away from me. Any more than I can from him," she added with a frown, and an air of genuine candor which struck a strange chill to Naomi's heart.

"We used to act together a lot before his accident, you know," Felicity went on, after a moment.

"I—thought perhaps you did."

"Did you never see him act?"

"No."

"No, I suppose you're too young. He was like no one else. With a tremendous dash and verve, and a sort of romantic gaiety." She gave a discontented shrug. "It infuriates me sometimes that he's so *different* now."

"But perhaps he can't help that." Naomi simply could not leave that unchallenged, little though she wished to argue with this frightening young woman. "It can't be easy to remain unchanged when one's career has been smashed and one's life altered out of recognition."

"Oh, there are ways and ways of taking these things." Felicity stretched her arms above her head, superb in her own glowing health and unimpaired fitness. "That bitter resignation isn't amusing. That's why I like to sting him into life sometimes. He's much more interesting that way. It's more like old times."

On which cool admission, Felicity gave Naomi a not unfriendly nod and drifted off.

"And I thought *Antonia* was dangerous!" muttered Naomi, staring at the glass panels of the closed door.

Perhaps Antonia was dangerous, of course, whatever Felicity said. Only it was difficult to define quite what one meant by dangerous. Dangerous to Jerome's peace of mind—or one's own?

"Oh, I musn't think on such ridiculous lines," Naomi told herself, suddenly frightened, in a way she could not explain. "What is it to me how much he cares—or doesn't care—for either of them?"

And, at that moment, the door into Miss Hersey's office opened and, like a living answer to Naomi's agitated self-questioning, Jerome walked into the room.

He simply said, "Hello, Naomi. Settled in all right?" and, sitting down at his desk, picked up the telephone which began to ring just then.

There was nothing in the scene which might not have been more or less duplicated in a thousand offices up and down the country. And yet,—with her perceptions sharpened perhaps by the conversation with Felicity—Naomi looked at him across the office, and that was the moment when she knew she loved him.

CHAPTER SIX

UNTIL that moment, when she sat quietly at her desk and watched Jerome Fennell talk to someone on the telephone, Naomi had always supposed that crises in one's life were attended by a certain amount of drama. Great changes should surely be marked by comparable disturbances in one's outward circumstances.

But not hint of drama entered the office as she made her overwhelming discovery. Jerome rapidly reviewed (and uncompromisingly rejected) some request made from the other end of the telephone wire. Naomi herself nervously clasped and unclasped her hands and allowed her gaze to drop to the manuscript play in front of her. That was all.

And yet—she trembled to think of it—everything had changed to such an extent that life could never be the same again. She loved Jerome, and because of that whatever he said or did, suffered or enjoyed, must now become her closest concern.

There was nothing she could do about it. Still less was there anything she could say about it. The tremendous revelation was hers, and she could share it with no one else.

In the most extraordinary way, it now seemed so natural that it was hard to believe that the discovery had been a shock.

"I knew it before," thought Naomi bewilderedly. "But *when* did I know it? When he was kind to Mother?—when he kissed me in this office?—that very first time when he held out his hand to me, in the studio at Foley, and said, 'Come here and let me have a look at you'?"

None of these seemed the likely moment because, after all, she had not been aware of any discovery then. But the fact remained—she

realized it now— that what had happened when Jerome came into the room just now was not so much a revelation as a recognition of a deeply known fact.

He had finished his telephone conversation now and, replacing the receiver, he reached for his letters and began to open them. At the same time, he asked her one or two questions about the weekend and whether she and her mother were comfortable in their new fiat.

To her surprise, Naomi found herself answering quite composedly, and when he asked her presently what she had been doing, she showed him the copy of the play and explained that she had taken the opportunity to make herself reasonably familiar with it.

"Good girl." He nodded. "Come down to the stage now, and be prepared to exercise all the patience you have. It's a lighting rehearsal this morning, and as that involves a great deal of standing about for the cast, everyone gets in a filthy temper. But I'll try to find time to explain a little of the technical side to you, so keep near me."

She wondered if he included himself among those who got in a temper. But as he seemed humorously resigned about it all, she supposed she could contrive to be the same.

In actual fact, the lighting rehearsal was a great deal more interesting than she had thought the term implied, and Jerome did indeed find time to explain a considerable amount of technical detail to her.

Naomi realized that she was going to have to learn a great many words and terms which were like a foreign language to her, but this was something she might have had to do in many other jobs. From the first she was fascinated by the complexity of this side of

the work, and she was amazed to realize the subtle difference which lighting alone could make, not only in the beauty of the general scene, but in the actual heightening of the drama on the stage.

There was a certain amount of grumbling from time to time, but nothing which could be described as an outburst of temperament, and even Felicity seemed co-operative. The only real trouble came from one of the lights men, operating a special lamp from high up at the side of the stage.

Jerome was patient but determined about it, calling up his directions quite good-humoredly. But the man either could not or would not understand what was required. There was a good deal of talk about "mixing" and "projecting", which Naomi tried hard to understand. And then suddenly Felicity—who had begun to tap her foot slightly and look impatient—said casually, "Go up and *show* him what you want, Jerry."

The words were quite inoffensive, but there was a touch of smiling malice in the way she said them which rubbed curiously on Naomi's nerves.

Perhaps it rasped Jerome's nerves too. For, although he took no notice at all of Felicity's suggestion, Naomi saw his hand tighten on the script he was holding until his knuckles stood out, white and tense.

He merely repeated his instructions, though to Naomi—whose ears were now growing sensitive to every inflection in his voice—it seemed that he spoke faster and with a peremptory edge to his tone.

Once more the scene was tried. And then, to Naomi's unspeakable surprise, Jerome turned to her and said, "What do you think? Shall we let it go at that?"

"Not if you think it can be improved," Naomi answered promptly.

"Do you think it can?" Or am I getting over-finicky and asking the impossible?"

To be asked to give anything like an authoritative opinion on *her* first day was somewhat disconcerting. For a moment she supposed he was merely testing her reactions, for the purpose of teaching her something. And then the extraordinary conviction came to her that he really *wanted* her to give an opinion—that, for some inexplicable reason, that rock-like confidence of his had been shaken—though by what she simply could not imagine.

"If you really want my amateur view," she said diffidently, "I think it still isn't right. I don't know technically what is required, but it seems to me that the scene looks too—too clear-cut. I imagine it should have some dreamlike quality about it, since the girl herself is half dreaming."

"Yes." He pressed his lips together for a moment. "Put rather unprofessionally, that's the idea."

Once more the scene was tried. And, as it became clear that there was no improvement, Naomi glanced at Jerome and was distressed to see that his forehead just below the hairline, was damp. She longed to suggest that it surely didn't matter too much—that perhaps one could leave the scene and try it another time. But, in her inexperience, she dared not offer an opinion.

Then Felicity came forward to the footlights and repeated impatiently. "Surely the simplest thing is to go up and show him

what you want, Jerry." She gestured to the iron ladder at the side of the stage. "You're not *afraid* to go up, are you?" she added with the innocent malice of a child stumbling on an unwelcome truth.

And, in that moment, Naomi knew what the matter was. He *was* afraid. Quite desperately afraid. And ever since this scene had started, he had been avoiding the conclusion which Felicity meant to force upon him.

"It isn't necessary," Naomi exclaimed, without a grain of knowledge behind the assertion. But Jerome brushed her and her protest aside, with a brutal literalness which made her stumble.

"You're probably right," he said curtly to Felicity, and, going over to the ladder, he began to ascend it.

Naomi simply could not watch him. Not that she thought there was any real fear of his falling. There was nothing particularly dangerous about the ascent, and it was something the technicians probably did a dozen times a day. But she knew, with an awful, sick sympathy, just what he was suffering.

As though she were part of him, she felt the same salt taste of panic in her mouth, the same fierce rebellion of tense, resistant muscles, the same harsh rigidity of a throat which ached to cry out in terrified protest. And perhaps the same hatred of the smiling woman who had deliberately forced this situation upon him.

Possibly some of the others sensed the inner drama of the situation too. At any rate, there was an uneasy silence as he went up the ladder. Then it was possible to hear the short discussion which took place, and a moment or two later the exact lighting effect which Jerome had demanded flooded the stage.

He called down one or two directions, in a tone which sounded curiously harsh. Then he asked, "Is it all right, Naomi?"

"Perfect," replied Naomi, with the authority of one who had been doing this sort of thing for years.

Everyone on the stage relaxed and began to talk again. But Naomi did not relax. Again, as though she were part of Jerome, she knew, to the very centre of her being, the moment when he faced the descent.

She longed to call up to him, "Shut your eyes, and just take it steadily."

But she must not show by the slightest indication that she or anyone else had noticed his fear. That was the only tribute one could pay to the proud effort he had made.

So she just stood there, nervously rubbing her hands together, because she felt instinctively that his hands were wet and icy by now, and she had the odd idea that, by chafing her own hands, she was putting some strength and life into his.

And then he was down at last, standing on the stage, but still holding the side of the ladder—carelessly, unless one looked sufficiently closely to see that he was practically supporting himself by the one hand gripping the ladder.

"All right. That will do for this morning," he announced shortly. Then he turned away, brushing aside someone who tried to ask him a question, and limped off to his office.

It was all Naomi could do not to strike Felicity's smiling face as she passed. But, if Jerome could retain his self-possession to the

end, she should be able to do the same. So she managed to look calm and collected as she followed him to his room.

He was sitting at his desk when she came in, completing the notes he had made. And, without looking up, he said—"Here's the lighting plot. You'd better have a look at it and see how much you remember of what you were told this morning."

Naomi came forward to take the sheets of paper, and only when she saw their agitated movement did she realize how his hand was shaking.

He must have become suddenly aware of that too. For, as she took the pages from him, he looked up> at her with dark, bleak, hollow eyes, and what he said was, "Did I make a complete exhibition of myself?"

"I don't know what you mean," she replied, quickly and defensively.

"You know damn well what I mean," he said drily. "Just as she knew. I suppose they all knew."

"Nonsense. You're exaggerating," Naomi told him quietly.

"Exaggerating?" He repeated the word, and gave a short, dreary little laugh. "There is no degree by which one could exaggerate the complete and utter panic I was in. God—" he passed his hand over his face—"I don't know which was worse, the terror or the humiliation."

"Don't be silly," Naomi said, but quite gently. "There's no humiliation in refusing to give way to fear. You went up that beastly ladder, didn't you?"

I should have called that heroic, rather than humiliating."

"Heroic!" Again he repeated her word, with that unhappy little laugh. "Heroic? That was just what I felt like! I was sweating like a kid in a nightmare— and you ask me to regard myself as heroic! Oh, go and have some lunch, Naomi."

"Go and have some lunch yourself," retorted Naomi. "You probably need it."

"No, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I feel sick," he said quite simply. But he gave her a slight smile and repeated, "Go along."

She saw that at that moment there was nothing to do but obey him, and so she went.

In a ridiculous way, she too felt as though food would choke her. But, telling herself that a mere onlooker was not entitled to the luxury of nervous reaction, she determinedly made her elf eat a moderate lunch, and, after strong coffee, she certainly felt better.

That made her think that perhaps by now Jerome too might feel a little differently. So she went into a promising-looking continental shop and bought sandwiches and a half-bottle of wine.

Naomi was a bit doubtful about the wine, as she was not experienced in these matters and she guessed that Jerome was. But one had to take a chance on something, and she returned to the office with her purchases.

"Has Mr. Fennell gone out yet?" she enquired of Miss Hersey.

"No. Though I don't know why not." Miss Hersey glanced at the clock. "It's long past his usual lunch time."

"He had something he wanted to finish," Naomi stated calmly. "I brought him in some sandwiches and a half-bottle of wine."

"On his instructions?" asked Miss Hersey, surprised.

"No," said Naomi, at which Miss Hersey looked more surprised still.

However, she obligingly produced a tray, plate and glass for Naomi, and looked approving when the meal was set out.

"You aren't going to ask first if he'd like it?" she enquired.

"No," said Naomi again, and carried the tray into Jerome's office.

He was sitting at his desk not doing anything in particular, though she saw that he had a sketching block in front of him, and he hardly looked up until she moved the sketching block and set down the tray in its place.

"What's this?" he enquired disagreeably.

"Just what it looks like," she told him. "Sandwiches and some wine. I thought you might feel like something by now, and it's getting a bit late to have lunch in a restaurant."

"I told you I wasn't hungry," he said, though he looked at the sandwiches with a sort of interest that was oddly boyish.

"That was quite a long time ago," Naomi reminded him.

He picked up one of the sandwiches and bit it. Then he turned the bottle of wine and read the label and said, "Good lord, what made you get this?"

"I—inexperience, I expect," Naomi admitted. "I don't know much about wine. But the man in the shop said it was a good dry wine, and I know men usually like it dry."

"As a matter of fact, it's a rather bad dry wine," he said, but quite good-humoredly. "However, there are worse."

And, taking a corkscrew from a drawer, he opened the bottle and poured out some of the despised wine. He sipped it, grinned unexpectedly at her and said, "Tastes remarkably good, after all. It must be something to do with the donor. You are a kind child, Naomi, and you're quite right about my being hungry by now."

"I'm glad." She smiled a little shyly and went over to her own desk, where she found something to do. And presently she had the satisfaction of seeing that he had eaten all the sandwiches and drunk enough of the wine to justify its choice.

No further reference was made to the events of the morning, and when she felt that he was free to give her some time, she ventured to ask him about one or two points to do with the lighting, which she had not understood at the time.

Quick and impatient though he might be about some things, Jerome—as she had already discovered—would take any amount of trouble to make an explanation clear, and she thought he genuinely enjoyed explaining the work he loved to a receptive audience.

He gradually began to look much more relaxed and almost completely himself again. Only, when he finally got up to go out

to a professional appointment, she noticed that he moved with an indefinable suggestion of weariness, as though he had had an exhausting day.

He gave her one or two things which he wanted copied, and told her that when they were finished she could go home.

"It won't be anything like five o'clock," Naomi assured him conscientiously.

"Never mind. It's been a tiring day. At least—" he corrected himself quickly—"I expect you've found your first day tiring." And he shrugged on his coat and prepared to go.

When he was almost at the door, he turned suddenly and said, "Thanks for the lunch. May I settle with you?"

"No." Naomi shook her head and smiled. "Have that on Uncle Enoch." At which he laughed more heartily than she would have believed possible, and went off.

For some while she typed steadily. Then the telephone rang, and when she answered it, a gay and cheerful voice said, "Is that Naomi?"

"Why, yes." She was puzzled.

"You faithless girl. Have you forgotten me so soon? and don't you recognize the voice of one of your warmest admirers?"

"Oh—Martin!" Suddenly she realized who it was, with an uprush of pure delight for the contact with someone so blessedly normal and uninhibited—so far removed from the bewildering undercurrents of life in the theatre. "Where *are* you, for heaven's sake?"

"About half a mile away. When am I going to see you?"

"Well, I'm rather busy at the moment—"

"I'm sure you are. Jerome proving something of a slave driver?"

"No, certainly not." Naomi was not going to have aspersions cast on Jerome, however pleased she might be to hear from Martin. "As a matter of fact, I shall be leaving about four-thirty. But I suppose you'll be going back to Foley soon after that?"

"No, I shan't. I'm staying in town overnight. That's why I rang up. What about coming out to dinner with me?"

"There's nothing I'd like better," Naomi declared, hoping her mother would not mind being deserted, but guessing that she would be very understanding of the circumstances.

"Fine. Shall I fetch you from the theatre?"

"N-no, I don't think you'd better do that. Besides, I must go home and see Mother first. She'll be dying to hear all about my first day."

"All right. Then I'll fetch you from home- wherever that may be."

She gave him the address. At which there was a slight whistle and he said, "But that's Jerome's place."

"Yes. Didn't you know we were living in the same block? For the time being, of course," she added quickly.

"No, I didn't know. What an odd idea."

"There's nothing *odd* about it." She was rather indignant. "It just happened that he wanted to get us settled here quickly, and I suppose he was more likely to know of a place in his own block than anywhere else."

"M-yes. Sounds all right, put like that."

"*Don't* be tiresome, Martin! Of course it sounds all right, because it *is* all right. I must go now, or I shan't get *my* work finished."

"All right." He laughed at what he called her *youthful* enthusiasm and, after teasing her for a few moments longer, he rang off, leaving her smiling uncontrollably *at* the gaiety of his manner and at the delightful realization that she would be seeing him in an hour or two.

After that, Naomi completed her work, tidied everything on her desk with the painstaking care of a new girl at school, and then put on her hat and coat and went into Miss Hersey's office.

"Mr Fennell said I could go when I'd finished," she explained.

"You aren't answerable to me," Miss Hersey replied good-humoredly. "How did he take the lunch tray?"

"The—oh," Naomi smiled, "I think he enjoyed the meal, although he was a bit resistant at first."

Miss Hersey laughed. Then she glanced curiously at Naomi and asked, "Did you realize what happened this morning?"

"In what way?" Naomi prevaricated innocently.

"Ever since his fall he's had a horror of heights. Understandably so, I should think." Miss Hersey shrugged sympathetically. "He

went up the ladder himself to see about that upper sidelight, I hear?"

"Yes, he did."

"What on earth made him do such a thing?"

"I have no idea," lied Naomi blandly.

"Perhaps," said Miss Hersey thoughtfully, "he's getting over that phobia."

"Perhaps," agreed Naomi cheerfully, and she smiled and went on her way. But all the way home she thought of the way his hand shook as he held out the lighting plot to her.

Her mother received her with delight, evidently finding it difficult to decide whether to deal first with Naomi's experiences or the charming details of her own shopping expedition.

"I've had such a *happy* day, dear," she declared, as she poured out tea. "How about you? Though I suppose one can't expect anything much to happen on one's first day anywhere."

Naomi thought of the day which had opened with the momentous discovery that she loved Jerome, and gone on through a variety of experiences and emotions that would have sufficed for a week.

"Why not, Mother?" she enquired mildly.

"Oh, well—I can't imagine that anyone rushes you into a great deal of work on the first day. At least—" Mrs. Thurrock glanced at her daughter— "I hope no one did. Though, of course," she added pensively, "I could imagine Jerome might be a hard taskmaster."

"No," Naomi said, "he's not that. At least, he certainly wasn't that today. He's a perfectionist, and expects the same standard from others that he does from himself. But he's patient about the things that matter and wonderfully clear in his explanations. There was a lighting rehearsal this morning—"

"How nice, dear—" Mrs. Thurrock's thoughts were already on something else. "Well, I'm glad it was all fun. I had a lovely time too. Mostly just looking round, you know. I bought one or two little things." Her tone implied a modest session at the haberdashery counter.

"For instance?" Naomi smiled indulgently, as she helped herself to sugar and thought how nice it was to relax in the familiar atmosphere created by her mother's artless conversation.

"Well, you know how much I've always wanted a really *good* suit. Nothing ostentatious. Just plain and good."

"Yes, I know," agreed Naomi, mentally pricing the kind of suit her mother would regard as really *good*.

"I found exactly what I wanted." Mrs. Thurrock smiled, in a dreamy way that would have amused Jerome, Naomi thought.

"Whereupon you had a good look at it and passed on?" suggested Naomi mischievously.

"No, I didn't, dear. It was much too good a chance to miss. I went in and bought it. In fact, I did something I've always wanted to do." Mrs. Thurrock's voice dropped a note or two. "I felt rather wicked—but I did it. I tried on the suit and I said I'd have it—and *then* I asked the price. It made me feel like a millionairess."

"And was the price a shock, when you heard it?" enquired Naomi amusedly.

"Not—really. No," said her mother, and hurried on to other things.

She spoke, rather unconvincingly, of other articles which she had seen but nobly rejected, and then at the end of her recital, she leaned back in her chair and said again, "It was such a happy day. But, do you know, I'm quite tired now. I'm looking forward to a cosy evening, with a book, and an early night in bed. What about you?"

Naomi explained about Martin's invitation, with a clear conscience now about leaving her mother for the evening. Indeed her mother was obviously delighted.

"That just shows how right I was!" She smiled happily. "It seemed an extravagance at the time, but I knew, by the pricking of my thumbs, that you were going to need it."

"Oh, Mother—" Naomi had heard about the pricking of her mother's thumbs often before, and somehow this phenomenon almost invariably preluded (and theoretically justified) some unusual expenditure—"did you buy something else?"

"Yes, indeed. After all, I wanted *you* to have something too by which to remember this happy day," Mrs. Thurrock explained generously. "Such a charming little evening jacket. Just the thing over that nice black cocktail dress of yours. I knew it was yours the moment I saw it."

In the face of such pleased generosity, it was impossible to do anything but thank her mother heartily for the really charming evening jacket which was then produced. But Naomi did implore

her to control her thumbs in future and to remember that the next quarter's allowance was still almost three months away.

By the time Martin arrived, Naomi was ready, in the simple but eminently becoming black cocktail dress and the new evening jacket. She opened the door to him herself and then brought him in, to meet her mother and have a drink.

Martin immediately began to lavish all his considerable charm on Mrs. Thurrock, and obviously made an excellent impression. So much so that Naomi could see that reflective light in her mother's eye which meant that Mrs. Thurrock was wondering, if, after all, it would have been better that Martin should be the brother with the money.

However, such speculation was naturally kept to herself, and presently she cheerfully wafted Naomi and her escort on their way.

"I like your mother," Martin remarked, as he hailed a taxi outside the block and handed Naomi in. "But you and she are not a bit alike, are you?"

"There's a sort of family likeness." Naomi looked surprised at his not apparently seeing it. "I have my father's eyes, but pretty well Mother's cast of features."

"I didn't mean in looks. You're completely unlike in temperament."

"Oh, that. Well, yes." Naomi laughed. "She's a bit irresponsible, I suppose. Sometimes I feel that I'm the mother and she's the child."

"That's what I mean. It must be a bit tough sometimes, I reckon you could do with someone to look after *you*, Naomi."

"Oh, I don't know." Again Naomi looked surprised. "I don't really mind the situation, you know. In fact, I rather enjoy it. Mother's excellent *fun*, and there's not a scrap of malice or ill-feeling in her. She *is* like a child—though an extravagant one." And she made Martin laugh a good deal over the shopping expedition.

"But she was quite right to buy you the jacket," he declared. "You look lovely, Naomi." A statement which naturally put her in an excellent mood for the evening.

Martin took her to a well-known restaurant, where the prices hardly justified the description he had once given of himself as "a chap without a bean." But Naomi supposed there were degrees of meaning in such a phrase. So she determined to enjoy it all, and contented herself with remarking, with a smile, "I think Mother's not the only extravagant one today."

"No?" He glanced up from the menu, and then he grinned. "Well, I don't get the chance of taking you out every evening."

"True. But you musn't think I'm used to this sort of thing," Naomi told him candidly. "I love it, of course. But I'll be very happy at a much more modest place another time."

"Does that mean there will be plenty of other times, Naomi?" Suddenly he was serious, in a way that surprised and faintly disconcerted her.

"Why, if you ask me—yes." She smiled and kept her tone determinedly light.

"You darling," Martin said, and his tone was not light at all.

"But I shouldn't think girls often refuse your invitations, do they, Martin?" she laughed.

"I was thinking exclusively of you at this moment," he retorted.

"Well, I can't quarrel with that," Naomi returned, still on a determinedly light note. "That's what any girl likes to hear when she's sitting opposite a charmer like you. What are we going to eat, Martin?"

He came back to the menu then—a trifle reluctantly, she thought—and they discussed food and wine for a few minutes.

Then, so that he should not bring the conversation back to anything too serious, Naomi began to give him a lively account of her day at the theatre.

He listened and laughed reluctantly at one or two of her rather trenchant comments. But he said, a little discontentedly, "The novelty will wear off, Naomi. You don't really want to go on with that sort of thing indefinitely, do you?"

"I'm not aiming to give it up on the first day," she retorted drily. "Since I have to earn my living, I could hardly have a more interesting way of doing it."

"Oh, that!" He made earning one's living sound a somewhat minor matter. "Don't pretend you're basically what's called a career girl. Suppose you fell in love?"

Once more, in a moment of crystal clarity, she saw Jerome walking into the office that morning. Then she said, with only the faintest catch of her breath, "I'll wait until it happens, Martin."

"You mean it hasn't happened yet?"

"Martin!" She was so startled that she could not hide her dismay, and she stared at him, wide-eyed. "Wh-what do you mean?"

He laughed then, and patted her hand, which lay near his on the table.

"Don't look so scared. No one's going to hustle you, and I can wait as well as the next chap. Let's just enjoy this evening, shall we?"

"Y-yes," she stammered. Let's just—enjoy— this evening."

But although she somehow forced a semblance of a smile to her curiously stiff lips, she was aware of a chill of acute dismay. A moment ago she had been appalled at the thought that Martin might know her secret. Now she was almost equally appalled that she knew his.

At least—was that what he had been trying to tell her? or must one always take Martin's utterances only half seriously? It was a point she could not possibly decide here and now, sitting across the table from him. So she forced herself to reply suitably to what had become very gay chatter on his part. And presently she looked round the restaurant, trying to find something on which she could comment with equal ease and fluency.

It was then that she gave a second gasp—this time an audible one. For two people had just come in and were being shown to a table at the other side of the room. One of them was Jerome and the other was Antonia.

Until that moment, Naomi realized, Antonia had dropped very much into the background of her mind. Felicity—so much more compelling and difficult to ignore—had in some degree taken her place, with her almost insolent assertion that, though Jerome sometimes hated her, he could not entirely escape her.

Now, as she saw Jerome smile, in a relaxed, genuinely amused way, at some remark of Antonia's, she experienced an agonizing sensation which she did not at first identify.

"There's Jerome," she said, unable to stop herself, although the words cut directly across something that Martin was saying. "And there's— Antonia too."

Martin glanced over, with mild interest.

"Oh, yes. He comes here sometimes. Antonia must be staying in town for the night, I suppose. She has an aunt or someone who puts her up sometimes."

"Has she?" Naomi said helplessly, and let Martin go on talking.

Somehow, she simulated interest in her meal. She even contrived, by a judiciously chosen word or two, to keep Martin talking.

But, while he talked, she pursued her own thoughts.

For a few moments they swung dizzily to and fro between Felicity and Antonia. Then, suddenly, they settled down into a discovery of chilling certainty. Felicity might be much the more dangerous person to Jerome—but not to Naomi.

Quite simply, he hated Felicity, whatever she might claim about the past. Whereas, with Antonia—

Surreptitiously, Naomi glanced across the restaurant once more, to see Jerome and Antonia, their heads close together, talking with what was unmistakably friendly intimacy.

And in that moment Naomi knew suddenly what was the unfamiliar, agonising sensation in her heart and brain. For the first

time in her gentle, well-ordered life, she was furiously, burninglly jealous.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS curious, Naomi thought, that one spoke of *burning* jealousy when, in actual fact, one felt almost inclined to shiver with the force of the sensation. But then perhaps it was like any other fever. One was hot and cold by turns, and little uncontrollable tremors shook one.

At that moment Martin asked, "Are you cold, Naomi? You shivered just now."

"No, no." She laughed quickly. "Someone just walked over my grave, I guess. Isn't that what's supposed to be happening if one shivers for—for no reason?"

"I don't know. I haven't studied that cheery subject." Martin made a face. "Let's try another topic."

Naomi laughed again at that—quite gaily and convincingly, she was surprised to hear—and, as though in obedience to his request, she asked casually, "Do you know Felicity Dene, Martin?"

"I've met her."

"Do you like her?"

"As an actress—yes. As a person—no. Do you?"

"No," said Naomi, before she could stop herself. "I think I hate her."

"Good lord!" Martin looked astonished. "I've never heard you speak with such feeling. What's she done to you?"

"Oh, it—it wasn't to me." She wished she had never started the subject, but since she had, she must contrive to make it all sound quite natural. "She did something very cruel to Jerome this morning. She made him climb some horrible ladder at the side of the stage."

"*Made* him? No one ever made Jerome do anything he didn't want to do yet," Martin asserted. "How did she make him, pray?"

"She asked him if he were afraid—in front of everyone. And, short of admitting that he was afraid, there was nothing he could do but climb the wretched thing."

"Ye-es. *That* was pretty horrible of her," Martin agreed, with unusual seriousness. "I suppose you've gathered that nowadays the very thought of height makes his skin crawl."

"Yes," said Naomi briefly, because Martin's expressive wording brought back the terror of the morning all too vividly.

"He was a fool to do it," Martin exclaimed impatiently.

"She made it very difficult for him not to."

"He could have said cheerfully that she was too darned right—he *was* afraid. That's what I would have done," Martin declared.

"But Jerome is not you," Naomi said. "People have different ways of carrying things off. Besides, Martin, I suppose you never *have* been afraid?"

"Never," he agreed cheerfully. "There's no special virtue in it. Lack of imagination, I expect." And he grinned at her.

"You needn't belittle yourself." She smiled back at him with all the genuine, friendly warmth she felt for him. "You're a nice, cheerful, courageous person. But then that's the very reason why you wouldn't mind admitting to a special form of fear. At least, you think you wouldn't. I think Jerome rather— loathes himself for being afraid, and that makes him over-anxious to hide it."

"Well, certainly Felicity chose a particularly hateful way of amusing herself," Martin agreed. "She always had a cruel streak in her. Thank heaven I didn't have her for a sister-in-law."

Naomi swallowed.

"Did you—nearly have her for a sister-in-law, then?"

"I think so. Jerome and she were very thick in the old days, you know. They acted a lot together, and I must say they looked very fine together. I imagine they were getting pretty near making a match of it, in spite of the fact that they also quarrelled a good deal. Then this accident happened, and of course she had no more use for him."

"I don't know where the 'of course' comes in," Naomi said angrily.

"I meant—since Felicity is what she is," Martin explained pacifically. "She's a little success-merchant, is our Felicity. She wouldn't have any time for an actor who could no longer act."

"So you think—" Naomi chose her words very carefully—"that there's nothing romantic between them now."

"Do *you*, after what you saw this morning?" Martin asked with a laugh.

"N-no. Except that she said something very odd to me."

"Oh?" He looked amused and enquiring. "So you had a little chat with her too?"

"I wouldn't put it like that, exactly. She came into my—I mean Jerome's—office this morning, before he had arrived, and she began talking about him, rather gratuitously, I thought. She said she didn't like simple or obvious people, but provocative ones, and that that was why, although he sometimes hated her, he could never quite get away from her."

"Modest little violet!" observed Martin, and laughed again. "Was she warning you off or something?"

"Oh, no!" Naomi looked shocked. "I think she hardly thought I existed. She was speaking of— Antonia, as a matter of fact." Instinctively, Naomi dropped her voice and glanced once more across the restaurant.

"Really? Well, I'd back Antonia against *her*, any day," Martin said easily.

"W-would you?" This was really the moment Naomi had been working up to. But, now that it had come, she felt her lips go dry, and she nervously passed the tip of her tongue over them. "But you said once—down at Foley—that you didn't think Antonia cared much for him."

"Did I?" Martin smiled. "You pay too much attention to my utterances. I'm not used to having my flighty remarks treated with respect. I daresay she's fond of him as most girls could contrive to be. He's not what you'd call a lovable chap. But he's attractively gilded—and that helps a lot. They seem to be getting on all right at the moment, don't they?"

"Yes," said Naomi, somehow managing to keep her voice steady, "they seem to be getting on all right at the moment."

And at that point Antonia looked up and saw them.

She smiled and, with an air of amused indulgence, drew Jerome's attention to them, with a gesture which very plainly coupled them together.

Jerome looked across then and raised his hand in a slight gesture of greeting. But he did not bother to smile, and turned back almost immediately to Antonia.

"Did we think of—of going dancing or something afterwards?" Naomi asked almost abruptly, because it had suddenly become absolutely impossible to go on sitting there, with the knowledge that Jerome was only a matter of yards away, enjoying the company of another girl.

"Dancing or a theatre—whichever you like," Martin offered eagerly. "But perhaps you've had enough of theatres for one day?"

Until that moment, Naomi had not thought of that point. But when Martin spoke of it she knew she *had* had enough of theatres, as he put it. She thought she would like to get right away from everything to do with stage or footlights, clever actresses like Felicity or dress designers like Antonia. Even from Jerome himself, whose presence was such agonizing joy and such rapturous frustration.

All of which she summed up in the one casual suggestion, "Let's make it dancing. I haven't danced for ages, and I love it. Do you?"

"If I can have you for a partner—beyond anything else," Martin assured her. And, as soon as they had finished their meal, they prepared to go.

They had to pass the table where Jerome and Antonia were sitting, and it was impossible not to pause for a word.

"Having fun?" asked Antonia, with the indulgent smile which one might use to an engaged couple. "I like the jacket, Naomi. Jerome and I were just saying what a good-looking couple you and Martin make."

"It was you who made the observation," Jerome corrected ungraciously.

"Well, you didn't challenge it," Antonia pointed out good-humoredly.

"No, I don't challenge it," Jerome agreed. "Don't stay out too late, Naomi. We have a heavy day tomorrow."

"I won't," Naomi promised eagerly. And they passed on—though not before Martin had exclaimed quite audibly, "Damned cheek! Does he think he's the lord of your leisure hours, as well as your boss at the office?"

"Oh, he didn't mean it that way," Naomi said hastily. Though she was not at all sure what way he had meant it. "Anyway, I wouldn't want to be out *too* late, Martin."

He made no comment on that. But during the rest of the evening he was so charming and assiduous in his affectionate attentions that she could only feel grateful to him—and faintly guilty that she could summon up nothing more romantically tender.

She *was* grateful to him. That was the word. Grateful not only for the fact that he did everything to make it an enjoyable evening, but because, thanks to him, she could at least keep at bay the angry tormenting thoughts which would otherwise have kept her imagination chained to a certain table in the restaurant they had just left.

In spite of what Jerome had said—and Naomi had dutifully endorsed—it was pretty late by the time they arrived back at the flat, and the handsome vestibule was silent and deserted.

"Goodnight, darling." Martin stood smiling down at her, as they paused by the lift. "We'll do this again soon."

"Oh, yes, Martin. Thank you so much for a lovely, lovely evening." After all, it was not his fault that there had been those agonizing moments. "You're a dear to go to so much trouble to make it a special occasion."

"Don't be silly." He gave a rough little laugh and suddenly pulled her against him. "Don't you know that I'd do a lot more than that for you?"

"Dear Martin, you don't have to—" She was dismayed, but managed not to show it by more than the nervous way she ran her hand up and down his arm. "You're the kindest of friends—cousins I think we agreed to make it, didn't we? I don't want you doing any more for me than a friend or cousin would do."

"Is that a hint?"

"If you need one—yes. But please don't let's start saying things, at this late hour, which either or both of us might regret."

"You're a cautious little soul, aren't you?" He laughed again, but angrily this time,

"No, I'm not."

"Not too cautious to kiss me goodnight?" He looked down at her, half laughing, but with a look in his eyes which warned her that she would be wise to refuse him. On the other hand, it seemed churlish, after so much generously given pleasure, to withhold even the lightest of kisses.

So she said, "No, of course not," and reached up on tip-toe, meaning just to brush her lips against his cheek.

But he caught her close in his arms and gave her a long kiss on her mouth. So long that she would have struggled to get away, if he had not held her too tightly for that.

She heard the swing door open and shut, and was furious that even a stranger should see her in such a position. Then Jerome's voice said coldly. "Do you mind—? You're blocking the way to the lift."

"Damn," said Martin letting her go. And then, to his brother—"You do have a talent for turning up at the wrong moment, don't you?"

"It seems so," agreed Jerome calmly, and he rang for the lift.

Naomi stood there, white with anger and humiliation, but quite unable to say anything. After all, there was no way of explaining away such a scene. Equally, it was no business of Jerome's if she and Martin cared to kiss each other goodnight.

She could only say, "Goodnight, Martin," in a rather shaky voice, when the lift arrived, and then precede Jerome into it.

There was a final glimpse of Martin's half amused, half angry face. Then the door slid shut and the lift went smoothly upwards.

"I thought you were on the third floor," Naomi said huskily, as they passed that floor.

"I am. I'm taking you up to your floor first."

"Thank you. "It was extraordinarily difficult not to sound meek and in the wrong.

"And if you must indulge in that rather vulgar style of necking with my brother, do you mind not doing it in quite so public a place?"

"It wasn't a public place!" All the pent-up anguish and frustration of the evening went into that and made her voice sound unnecessarily resentful and aggressive. "There was no one there until you came along."

He said nothing, but attentively studied a notice in the lift.

"Anyway—" to her horror, she found she could not let well alone, but had to go on justifying herself "is it any business of yours what I do?"

"None whatever," he replied equably, "provided you don't make yourself conspicuous. I prefer anyone who works for me to preserve a certain degree of dignity."

"Don't be *ridiculous*?' The lift had stopped by now, but she made no attempt to get out. "You're just making a disagreeable fuss because—because—"

"Why?" he enquired, as though her absurd protests mildly interested him now.

"Because you didn't like my going out and enjoying myself with Martin, I suppose," she said angrily, at random.

"You exaggerate your importance to me, my dear," he replied drily, and held open the outer door of the lift for her. "Goodnight."

She wanted to stay and explain that she had not meant it in that way at all—that she was merely referring to the fact that she had stayed out late enjoying herself in spite of his warning. But he was holding the door now, with an air of over-strained patience, and there was nothing to do but mutter, "Goodnight"—in a voice which sounded sulky because she was so miserable—and get out of the lift.

The door immediately closed behind her once more and, even before she had put her key in the lock of her own front door, the lift had dropped out of sight again.

The flat was in darkness, except for a shaded lamp in the small square hall, and her mother was evidently asleep, since there was no sound from her room.

Slowly Naomi went into the beautiful sitting-room—whose every line and shade had given her such pleasure until now—and, sitting down in a low chair, she buried her face in her hands.

How on earth had it all happened?

She *loved* him. Only this very day had she discovered that wonderful fact. And yet, in a matter of minutes, she had contrived to irritate him, argue with him, abuse him and finally disgust him.

The tears ran down and trickled through her fingers. She told herself between angry little sobs that it was all Martin's fault. But she knew that was not entirely just. Martin was not responsible for the unfortunate way she had spoken in the lift. But then Jerome should not have made that, insufferable remark about "a vulgar style of necking." It was quite, quite unjustified.

Then she remembered the way Martin had held her, and the fact that, because she could not struggle, she must have seemed happily acquiescent. And she writhed in angry humiliation as she imagined what the scene must have looked like to a casual observer.

Not that Jerome was even a casual observer. He had a mild interest in both of them. Only a mild one, of course. She had his own word for it that she must not exaggerate her importance to him. And, as she remembered that final barb, she sobbed afresh.

Presently, however, the pretty little French clock on the table beside her struck two musical notes, as a reproachful reminder that she was still further disobeying Jerome's injunction. If she were to be fit for anything the next day, she must try to get some' sleep now. And so, picking up the evening jacket, which she had cast from her in the first moment of misery, she went dejectedly to her bedroom.

To fall asleep in dejection is distressing enough. To wake in wretched apprehension is far worse. And when Naomi opened her eyes the next morning, all she really wanted to do was to bury her head under the bed-clothes and pretend she did not exist.

Such cowardly escape was not possible, however. She had to get up and dress, show some degree of cheerful good spirits over breakfast with her mother, and then take herself off to the theatre.

She managed it all, with a very good grace. Only when she finally stepped into the lift again, she was reminded so poignantly of the unfortunate scene a few hours ago that it was all she could do . not to turn round and run back into the flat.

"It's no good being silly and self-conscious," she admonished herself. "Life has to go on, in an ordinary, day-to-day way, even if you feel *deadly*. The best thing is to be cool and dignified. And if Jerome is horrid and sarcastic, just pretend not to notice. And if he's sullen and irritable, remember he's the boss and pays a good salary. That's the relationship in future."

After this sensible self-lecture on the way down, it was disconcerting to get out of the lift and find Jerome standing at the main door of the block, waiting for his car to be brought round from the garage.

Still more disconcerting was it to have him nod to her quite agreeably and say, "Good morning, Naomi. Can I give you a lift?"

"Th-thank you." She hardly knew if she were more relieved or taken aback. But, as the car arrived just then, there was nothing to do but get in beside him and try to think of some original remark about the weather.

On the short drive to the theatre, he made one or two conventional comments and, as far as she could see, he was neither embarrassed nor disturbed by any recollection of what had happened the previous night.

Then why this pleasant overture? Was he sorry that he had been so harsh to her?

Naomi stole a surreptitious glance at him. But it was difficult to suppose that remorse was consuming him.

Then perhaps the idea had come to him that, unless he made a real effort to re-establish easy relations between them, work at the theatre might suffer?

She glanced at him again. But he did not look as though he were making any particular effort about anything. His casual glance was on the traffic, and his voice when he spoke to her was cool and unconcerned.

And then it came to her, with stinging realization —the obvious explanation which she should have seen from the beginning. It was contained in those words he had so contemptuously uttered: that she must not exaggerate her importance to him.

That was what she had been doing all over again. While the simple fact was that he was behaving as though nothing had happened just because he regarded the whole silly incident as of practically no importance.

While she had been worrying and agonizing and —yes, *crying*— about it, he had pretty well dismissed the whole matter from his mind.

It was a sober and somewhat chastened Naomi who entered the theatre that morning, and started on a busy and exacting day.

Jerome was quite pleasant to her, in an impersonal sort of way, during most of the morning. The only awkward moment came when the telephone rang, just as he was going out of the room. He answered it, paused a second, and then handed the receiver to her, with the curt observation, "For you."

"F-for me?" stammered Naomi, blushing scarlet and hating herself for doing so.

"Yes. Martin, I imagine. You might tell him not to ring you up too often here. These are allegedly working hours, Jerome said.

Then he went out of the room and left her to it.

"Martin—?"

"Hello, my sweet. How are things this morning, after Jerome's nasty crack last night? Don't let him take it out of you, just because he knows no girl would hang round *his* neck at one-thirty in the morning."

"I didn't hang round your neck," replied Naomi coldly.

He laughed.

"You were very sweet, all the same," he assured her. "Did he make himself offensive?"

"No," said Naomi, with monumental restraint. "Martin, please don't ring me up at the office—at the theatre, I mean. It's very awkward for me and—"

"Jerome nasty about it, you mean?"

"I mean," stated Naomi categorically, "that I'm here to work, and I just haven't the time to indulge in long private conversations."

"You should never let your work interfere with your private life," Martin declared gaily. "That's your mistake, my sweet little Naomi."

She longed to tell him she was not his sweet little Naomi. But it was not an argument she could safely develop when Jerome might return at any moment. So she contented herself with reiterating

that she simply would not accept private calls if he made them too often. At which he laughed and said, "Well, I'm off back to Foley now, so you won't be troubled by me for a week or so. Are you sorry?"

"I can't bear it," she replied, trying, not very successfully, to emulate his lightness of tone. "Thank you again for a lovely evening, Martin. And now I must go. Give my regards to your mother—and goodbye."

Then she firmly replaced the receiver, before he could indulge in any further conversation.

She was a little afraid Jerome might make some comment when he came back into the room. But he was gone some considerable time, and when he finally returned he made no sign of even remembering the telephone call or the half-rebuke he had administered.

Several times during the next few days she had occasion to notice that this was his characteristic way of handling things. He could be brutal—he could even be cruelly sarcastic—if he were momentarily angry. But it was unusual for his displeasure to last for any length of time.

Even with Felicity, she noticed, he could sometimes be on almost intimately friendly terms, in spite of the fact that they sparred sharply as well.

It was a situation Naomi simply could not understand. Her own feelings were slow and deep and constant. But she told herself that possibly this was the way theatre people behaved to each other. Perhaps, because they lived on their nerves, they flared up easily and as easily subsided, with few things mattering really deeply to them.

The explanation seemed plausible—but she wished she could have known which were the things that mattered deeply to Jerome.

As it was, however, she became daily more fascinated by her work. And, quite impersonally, she knew that Jerome had been right to pick her out, inexperienced though she might be.

She learned quickly, judged accurately, and although she was diffident about expressing an opinion, she was never completely at sea on any issue.

"Tell me what you think," he would say. "Never mind if it's wrong. Just tell me."

And never did he suggest that what she had to say was either silly or pointless.

This, she told herself, was what she must be satisfied to have. Personally, she was of little or no interest to him. But in his work he was glad of her. And perhaps the time would come when he would even depend on her to some extent and make her feel that she was of *some* importance in his life.

She thought she had become quite resigned to this situation when, one afternoon, after she had worked alone in the office for most of the day, she returned to find her mother in what she herself would undoubtedly have called a state of pleasant flutter.

"Such a delightful thing, Naomi dear," she exclaimed, before Naomi had taken off her coat. "Where do you think we are going for next weekend?"

"I can't imagine." Naomi smiled. "Tell me."

"To Foley Grange."

"To—Foley? But why? How? She was both disturbed and elated in almost equal degrees. "Who asked us?"

"Jerome did. He dropped in this afternoon, to see how I had settled down here and if I were happy. I thought it very kind of him."

"Very kind," Naomi agreed.

"And he asked me if I found it a bit dull, on my own and with no house to look after. I told him that of course I didn't mind in the *least*," said Mrs. Thurrock, who had always heartily and frankly disliked housework. "That made him laugh—he has rather a charming laugh, Naomi, don't you think?"

"Yes." Naomi agreed again. "He has a charming laugh—at times."

"Well, then he asked if there were anything special I would like. And, since he had *asked*, you know, I told him that I should love to visit Foley Grange one day."

"Oh, Mother, do you think you should have invited yourself, like that?"

"I didn't invite myself," her mother replied with dignity. "*He* invited *me*, as soon as I had expressed the wish. Or rather, of course, he invited us both, because I said I was sure you would simply love to go there again."

"And what," asked Naomi, a little fearfully, "did he say to that?"

"He frowned, as though he were considering something—though I can't imagine what—and then said, 'Yes, of course—I suppose she would,' as though an idea had just struck him. And then he said we must certainly both come—and what about next weekend? So, naturally I said we should be delighted, and it's all settled. I'm so

pleased. I was really dreadfully disappointed not to be asked the first time you went there."

"Were you, dear?" said Naomi, quite unable to spoil her mother's pleasure with any objection, now that the omission had been rectified. But she felt she would have given a great deal to have been present at the interview and decide for herself how Jerome had taken the suggestion.

And what did her mother mean by saying he had apparently considered her own inclusion in the invitation rather thoughtfully and then observed that "of course" she would like to come?

Naomi greatly feared that he had something to do with Martin in mind. And that reminded her that Martin himself would probably prove something of a problem during the weekend visit.

It was not going to be easy. But at least she would be seeing Jerome again in a less official setting than the one which had become natural to them both by now.

The next morning, she ventured to mention the invitation and to thank him for his kindness to her mother.

"I think my description of Foley made her long to see the place," was the tactful way Naomi put it, "and you really have given her the greatest pleasure by inviting her there."

"I hope there'll be some pleasure in it for you too," he replied.

"Yes, of course," Naomi said hastily, and turned back to her work. But she was aware that he continued to watch her in a thoughtful manner, and that made her color—try as she would to check the rising blush.

He said nothing further, however, and presently Felicity came in, with some complaint about one of her costumes.

"Come and see it for yourself, Jerry," she demanded.

"No. See the wardrobe mistress, if you want it refitted."

"But it isn't only a question of refitting. The dress doesn't suit me. It isn't *me*."

"I'm afraid it has to be you," he returned drily. "Your costume is part of the general design, as well as yours individually. It's an unusual one, I know, but I can assure you that you'll be an enormous success in it."

"You wouldn't say that if you saw me in it."

"I'll come and see you later. Not now, I'm busy."

"You think too much of the general scene and not enough of the individuals in it," she objected. "That's the difference between the producer and the actor. Oh, Jerry, I wish you were an actor again. Everything was so different then."

There was a heavy little silence, which measured itself out in heartbeats that Naomi could almost hear. Then he said, without much expression, "I wish I were an actor again too, Felicity. Do you never think of that when you make these casual remarks?"

"Oh—" she shrugged impatiently—"I suppose your producing means nearly as much to you. Don't be so self-pitying."

Naomi heard him catch his breath on a harsh little gasp. And, before she knew what she was doing, she turned on the other woman furiously and said, "He's not self-pitying. It's the last thing

he is. And if you weren't a cruel, shallow, stupid woman you would know it!"

If Naomi had got up and bitten her, Felicity could not have looked more surprised. She actually took a step backwards. Then she gave an astonished, incredulous little laugh.

"Is that the way you let your office staff talk to your cast?" she demanded angrily of Jerome.

"No. And nor do I allow my cast to talk to me like this," he replied shortly. "Please go, Felicity. I'll come and look at the costume in ten minutes' time. And as for you, Naomi, kindly mind your own business in future, and don't try to make yourself more important than you are."

Felicity laughed again—this time in a more satisfied way—and she went off, with a toss of her head.

For several minutes after she had gone there was silence in the room. Naomi felt too shattered to go on with her work, and too scared even to look across at Jerome. She sat there, with her head bent, staring at the tightly clasped hands which lay in her lap.

Then at last he said, harshly, "For God's sake, don't start crying, or I shall probably wring your neck."

"I'm not crying."

"Aren't you? I'm sorry." And then, after another long pause, and as though it were dragged from the depths of his being—"Thank you, child. I know you meant it well."

CHAPTER EIGHT

ODDLY enough, it was when there was that sudden softening in Jerome's manner that Naomi felt she could hardly bear it.

The difficult apology, and the acknowledgment of her good intentions, brought the tears much nearer than the rebuke had done—harsh though that had been. But she knew that an emotional scene was the very last thing he wanted. So she managed to look up and give him a faint smile.

"It's all right. I did forget myself, I know, and I shouldn't have spoken to her like that. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't really matter." His slightly weary gesture dismissed the whole odious incident. "But I'm afraid you've probably made a serious enemy."

"That doesn't worry me!" Naomi declared scornfully, at which he laughed. And after that, incredibly, the morning proceeded on its usual course.

But Naomi had not heard the last of the incident. Later that day she ran into Felicity in one of the passages, and the other girl stopped and remarked, with curiosity rather than resentment, "You did leap out at me this morning, didn't you? Why?"

"I—didn't much like what you said to Mr. Fennell." Naomi's tone was cold. "And I spoke without thinking, even though it wasn't my business, I admit."

Felicity looked at her speculatively, and then asked, as though she were discussing nothing more personal than the weather, "Are you keen on Jerome?"

It was no good giving anything less than a categorical denial, of course. But even so, Naomi felt a superstitious little thrill of dread as she heard herself lie flatly about her inmost feelings.

"No," she said drily. "Certainly not."

"Because I was just thinking that, if you were—" Again Felicity's bright glance travelled over her speculatively—"it must have been pretty searing to have him give you quite such a complete brush-off."

Naomi thought of the few difficult words with which he had made amends for that later, and somehow she managed to smile quite naturally as she shrugged and said, "Oh, I didn't mind, really. I'd asked for it, I suppose. After all, it *wasn't* my business."

She would have passed on then. But Felicity put out a hand and detained her.

"Shall I tell you something?" she said.

"If you—want to." Naomi strove to sound no more than politely indifferent.

"Jerome simply loathes youthful 'crushes'. He used to suffer a good deal from youngsters yearning over him when he was an actor. I can't tell you how much he detested it."

"He must have."

"He had his own way of dealing with it, of course." Felicity laughed reminiscently and not very kindly. "He can be pretty brutal about anything of the kind."

"Is that so?" The polite indifference had become almost impossible to maintain. But, since it was the sole shield between her secret and the other girl's malicious curiosity, Naomi somehow contrived to maintain it. "Well, I'm not likely to trouble him that way, if that's what you're implying."

"No?" Felicity looked frankly sceptical. "He's a difficult man to be near with indifference. One either loathes or loves him, I think."

Naomi could find absolutely nothing to say to that. And after a moment, Felicity went on thoughtfully, "Unless, of course, you have someone outside the theatre who is important to you. That would make you immune, I suppose. Perhaps that's it?"

"Perhaps," agreed Naomi, and passed on.

She was more shaken than she wanted to admit, even to herself. It was unpleasant to have incurred Felicity's enmity—which she felt sure she had, in spite of that deceptively good-humored air. It was even more disquieting to be questioned about her inmost feelings. Worst of all, however—and well Felicity knew it, Naomi felt sure—was the barb about Jerome's dislike for "yearning youngsters."

"There's *no* element of that in my attitude," she assured herself uneasily. "He couldn't even imagine such a thing."

But she determined, there and then, to be dignified and slightly reserved during the weekend at Foley, so that nothing—nothing at all—could give him the idea that she cherished an unwelcome weakness for him.

So anxious was she on this point that she put the new manner into practice right away, and during the next few days she kept a very distinct distance between Jerome and herself.

It had been decided that Jerome should drive her and her mother down to Foley on the Friday afternoon, and so it was arranged that Mrs. Thurrock should come to the theatre about four, and they should start from there.

As usual, she was childishly pleased and excited over the prospect of doing just what she wanted to do, and she was gratified rather than put out at being asked to leave her luggage at the stage door and come upstairs, since Mr. Fennell was not quite ready.

Jerome was explaining something to Miss Hersey in the inner office, but Naomi was already in the outer office, with her coat on.

"Darling, how nice!" Mrs. Thurrock looked round approvingly. "If there were a few flowers about, it would be quite a charming room."

"It's quite all right as it is," Naomi assured her hastily, for she could not imagine Jerome's reaction to a few flowers, even in the outer office. He probably associated them only with first nights and—horrid thought—youthful adulation.

"Well, I don't know. I always think even a place of work can be made to look attractive," declared Mrs. Thurrock, who had successfully avoided places of work during most of her life. "Now, if I had my way—"

But at that moment Jerome came through into the outer office, apologized for keeping them waiting and, having collected one or two things he wanted to take with him to Foley, he shepherded them downstairs.

On the way they passed Felicity, who gave Jerome a casual "goodnight," and Naomi and her mother a quick, comprehensive glance.

"Wasn't that Felicity Dene?" enquired Mrs. Thurrock interestedly, as soon as they were established in the car—she sitting in front with Jerome, while Naomi sat behind.

"Yes," said Jerome and Naomi in chorus, but neither seemed inclined to add anything to that.

"I thought so. I saw a photograph of her in a magazine only today. She doesn't *look* frightening," observed Naomi's mother pensively.

"Frightening, Mrs. Thurrock? What made you think she was frightening?" Jerome asked, while Naomi tried, ineffectually, to make signs to her mother that the subject should be dropped as soon as possible.

"Naomi once described her as that."

"Mother, I didn't!"

"Yes, darling. The first time you ever mentioned her," insisted Mrs. Thurrock, who sometimes displayed a terrifyingly accurate memory for the things one wanted forgotten. "You said she wasn't at all a nice person, but so gifted that the world was her oyster. And you added that it was a frightening combination. I thought it was rather neat."

"Very neat," agreed Jerome. He sounded somewhat amused, though he did not turn his head. "But I thought you declared you were not worried over having her for an enemy, Naomi."

"*Is* she an enemy?" Mrs. Thurrock was not only naively interested, she was quite ready to bristle defensively on her child's behalf.

"No, no," Naomi assured her hurriedly. "I'm very small fry to anyone like Miss Dene. She wouldn't regard me as an enemy worthy of her steel."

"But do you mean she doesn't *like* you?" Naomi's mother sounded honestly incredulous.

"It doesn't seem possible, does it, Mrs. Thurrock?" Naomi could hear the genuine note of laughter in his voice now. "But I'm afraid Naomi was very rude to her the other day."

"*Naomi* was? My dear child, how unlike you. Why was that?"

"It was unavoidable," Naomi said shortly.

"Why was it unavoidable?"

Naomi could find no useful answer to that. And after a moment, to her astonishment, Jerome said thoughtfully, "It was unavoidable, Mrs. Thurrock, because Naomi is both loyal and impulsive. In addition, she has inherited from you an almost tender regard for anyone who is at all unfortunate or— inferior?"

"Well, dear me—what a charming compliment!" Mrs. Thurrock was enchanted to be drawn into this personally. "I'm quite mystified—but very gratified too."

"Then I hope you will forgive us if we don't explain any further," Jerome said gravely. "It would be in the nature of a breach of professional confidence."

"Oh, I *see*." Mrs. Thurrock didn't really see at all, but she was greatly flattered by this implied appeal to her almost non-existent sense of discretion.

After that, she settled down comfortably to enjoy the long drive, while Naomi sat behind and repeated to herself over and over again that Jerome had described her as both loyal and impulsive, and the possessor of an almost tender regard for anyone at all unfortunate or—inferior.

Did he really suppose—her poor, poor darling— that he was in any way *inferior* because of his lameness? And did he really think of her in such approving—almost affectionate—terms?

How was one to remain reserved and dignified with him, if this was the kind of thing he was going to say? She simply could not imagine. And it seemed to her that the weekend at Foley stretched before her, enticing yet problematical. An exquisite danger and a hazardous joy.

Once more, Mrs. Courteney welcomed Naomi with all the correct expressions of conventional cordiality—which she also extended this time, of course, to Naomi's mother. Both ladies immediately engaged in a sort of competition in gracious politeness, from which Mrs. Thurrock finally came out the gratified winner on points.

"A very correct and charming hostess, of course," she remarked afterwards, upstairs, to Naomi, in a tone which would have prevented anyone from wishing to know Mrs. Courteney. "And what a *lovely* place, darling!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

Naomi smiled as her mother wandered to and fro between their adjoining rooms.

"Much handsomer even than I imagined. Jerome must be extremely wealthy."

"Yes, I suppose he is."

"And even Martin must be very, very comfortable," mused Mrs. Thurrock, in a satisfied tone. "I was a little worried at first when you said you liked him so much the better of the two, but—"

"*Did* I say that, Mother?" Naomi looked quite startled.

"Why, yes, dear. Of course you did. Don't you remember? When you first came back from Foley and I asked you which you liked best. You were quite emphatic about it."

"Was I?" Naomi wanted to say that a great many things had happened since then, but she refrained. "Well, anyway, I don't think I would describe myself as having a very personal interest in either of them."

"Don't be silly, dear," replied her mother tranquilly. "And that's rather an affected way of talking. Of course you are interested in them both—. What girl wouldn't be? It's just a question of proportion. And, by the way, where *was* Martin? He didn't put in an appearance when we arrived."

"I have no idea," said Naomi.

But Martin was there when they arrived downstairs once more. He greeted Mrs. Thurrock in a friendly way, and Naomi with a kiss of such uninhibited and obvious affection that his mother raised her eyebrows.

What Jerome did Naomi was not quite sure, for he was behind her when this scene took place. All she herself could do was to accept Martin's greeting with the slightest of kisses in return, and the fervent hope that she had somehow imparted to this occasion an air of casual unimportance.

After that they went in to dinner.

Naomi was forcibly reminded of that other time, when she had first come to Foley, and Jerome had arranged that he was already there when she came into the dining room. There was, she noticed, with a warm little feeling at her heart, a marked difference now. For he made no attempt to hide his disability, and limped round the table to his place without any apparent concern.

One small victory at least had been won. He was no longer bitterly self-conscious about his injury in front of her. Nor, it seemed, in front of her mother either.

After dinner, Martin was very much inclined to monopolize Naomi. And since her mother was quite prepared to co-operate in what she took to be Naomi's wishes, she devoted herself to engaging Mrs. Courteney's interest, though it was rather heavy going.

Jerome was thus left at a loose end. But quite soon he went off to his studio, and no more was seen of him.

This was, though she strove to hide it, the greatest disappointment and frustration to Naomi. After all, there were not so many hours to a weekend, and it seemed to her that too many of them were already slipping away without his longed-for company. She tried hard to respond to Martin's gay chatter and only half-concealed lovemaking, in a manner calculated to please him sufficiently without overstepping any boundaries that his mother might consider unseemly.

Several times he endeavored to get her entirely to himself. But, without appearing to do so, Naomi out-manoeuvred him. And even when the two older ladies at last proposed to retire, and he eagerly

tried to make Naomi remain, she managed to plead weariness and make her escape.

"Well then you must promise to come out with me tomorrow," were his parting words. "Remember I was done out of quite a share of your company last time."

Naomi smiled and managed to make some noncommittal reply, which obviously did not satisfy him. Then she bade Mrs. Courteney goodnight and went upstairs with her mother.

Only when they were almost at their bedroom doors did the conviction come to Naomi that she simply could not go to bed without at least saying goodnight to Jerome. It was foolish, of course—and not at all dignified or reserved, as her intention had been—but she so longed for even one word from him that she made some excuse to her mother about having forgotten a book, and retraced her steps.

When she came to the division in the passage her heart was beating ridiculously hard, and she told herself that he had probably gone to his own room long ago, anyway.

But, as soon as she came in sight of the studio door, she saw there was a line of light under it.

With the curious sensation of reliving a vital incident in her life, Naomi went up the two or three steps and knocked resolutely on the door.

"Come in."

It even seemed that his voice had the same absent note in it. And, as she pushed open the door and went in, she saw that, once more, he was seated before an easel, sketching.

"I—just looked in to say goodnight," she said, a trifle breathlessly, though she strove to make that sound as matter-of-fact as possible.

"That was very nice of you," he replied, without looking up.
"Goodnight, Naomi."

It could hardly have been more deflating, she felt. What she had hoped or expected she did not know, even now. But she would almost rather he had been angry with her than that he should scarcely notice that she was there.

"What are you—doing?" She hated herself for persisting. But the tyranny of her inner longing was too strong for her.

"Sketching—as you see. Want to come and have a look at it?"

"Yes, please." She tried not to sound too desperately eager, and she came quite slowly across and stood beside him.

Naomi could hardly contain her surprise.

"Why, it's—*me!*" she gasped. "I, I mean," she amended.

"Never mind about the grammar." He laughed. "Do you like it?"

She stared for a moment at the serious girl, with the wistful eyes and the unexpectedly firm mouth.

"Do I really look like that?" she asked him.

"Sometimes. At least, it's a sort of composite picture of two of your moods. Sometimes you look wide-eyed and a trifle scared. When I'm unkind to you, I suppose. But then you set your mouth and go bald-headed for what you think is right. Like the time you flew at Felicity."

"You're never unkind to me," was what she said, as though that were the most important point in his speech of explanation.

"Of course I am." He corrected her with careless certainty. He was neither boastful about it nor, as far as she could see, regretful. He merely stated a fact. "But tell me what you think of the sketch."

"It's very clever. Very—nice, I think. What are you going to do with it?"

"Keep it. To remind me of you when you're gone," he said, and he gave her that brilliant, mocking smile which so transformed his face.

"But I'm not going!" She was deadly serious about that. "I've no thought of going. Unless you— send me away," she added, with an indescribable chill at her heart.

"Oh, no, I shan't send you away. But competition will be too keen, one of these days, I can see. Perhaps I'll give you the portrait when you get married, Naomi."

"But I'm not going to get married!" If possible, she was even more deadly serious about that.

"Never?" He laughed.

"I mean—I've no notion of doing so at present—"

"And don't even want to discuss it, eh?" He drew his finger lightly down her cheek.

"I don't know what you mean," she cried, greatly agitated. "One doesn't discuss such a thing unless there's something specific to discuss."

Just for a moment—a dizzy, incredulous, rapturous moment—she wondered if he were leading up to something she hardly dared to guess at, even in her own mind.

But then, almost immediately, this absurd shadow of a hope was cruelly dispersed. Because he said lightly, in the tone of one merely amusedly seeking information, "And there's nothing specific to discuss, Naomi?"

"Of course there's not. You *know* there isn't." She realized that was a foolish amplification of her statement, for how should he know—or care to know—anything about her private affairs? "There's no question of it," she said more quietly. "You know the situation as well as I do—" She thought it a good idea to bring in her family responsibilities here, so that he should know there was nothing in Martin's absurdities. "It just isn't a practical possibility—apart from anything else," she finished firmly.

He didn't answer that immediately. He rubbed his chin meditatively and stared rather discontentedly at the portrait.

"I suppose you're right," he said at last. "It isn't a practical possibility, at present."

She could hardly contain the great sigh of relief which welled up in her. At least he knew now that there had been nothing serious between her and Martin. And in her relief she smiled at him.

"I didn't think we were going to have quite such a serious discussion when I came in." She gave a little laugh. "I must go now. Goodnight."

"Just a moment—"

She turned immediately, very willing to stay as long as he liked.

"You're not upset or—scared about Felicity, are you?"

"Why, no. Certainly not." She was both astonished and touched to find that his mind was still on that matter. "I don't particularly like being on bad terms with anyone. But, as I said to Mother, I don't imagine she rates me worthy of any real attention."

"She might," he said briefly. "If there's any trouble, you come to me. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand." She put out her hand and touched his, shyly, but gratefully. "Thank you for bothering. You make rather a habit of solving my problems for me, don't you?"

Do I?" He looked a little surprised. "I hadn't thought of myself in that light, and I don't know quite what else I did for you.

"Oh, Jerome!" She could not very well call him that in the office, but she could here at Foley. "You know very well that you solved almost everything for Mother and me, after Uncle Enoch's blow."

"Oh, that!" he shrugged. "That was merely righting a -wrong."

"Call it what you like—it changed life for us," Naomi said, with a laugh. And, feeling a great deal happier, she bade him goodnight once more and went away to her own room.

She was so glad—so infinitely glad—that she had found the courage to seek him out in the studio. But for that, she would never have had the chance to assure him that she had no serious interest in Martin—or anyone else, come to that.

This might not be of vast importance to Jerome. In fact, she remembered, wincing, had he not warned her that she overestimated his interest in her? But the fact remained that, if ever, by

some wonderful, miraculous chance, he began to take a real interest in her, he would know already that no one had forestalled him.

And, on this somewhat negative but oddly comforting reflection, Naomi fell asleep.

The next day proved delightful from every point of view. To begin with, the weather was more than kind, with a soft, radiant warmth more like May than March. And then Mrs. Thurrock's openly expressed pleasure in everything was infectious.

All over again, through her mother's eyes, Naomi saw the attractions of Foley, and once more it was Martin who proved the perfect guide. Released now from any anxiety about possible misinterpretation on Jerome's part, Naomi was free to enjoy his company as a gay and charming companion. And, if it had not exactly been his intention to include Mrs. Thurrock in the party, at least he accepted the situation with admirable grace, and lavished his charm on both of them almost equally.

"A really delightful fellow!" was Mrs. Thurrock's verdict, when she and Naomi were taking half an hour's rest in their rooms after lunch. "And capable too, in his way."

"Do you think so?" Naomi, curled up comfortable in a chair in her mother's room, considered that. "I think he's too much of a playboy to be capable."

"In his own way—as I said," her mother insisted. "He has the makings of a splendid gentleman farmer. I think Jerome is wrong just to keep him hanging about here."

"Who says Jerome does that?" Naomi immediately took up the cudgels on Jerome's behalf. "*He* isn't responsible for what Martin does with his life."

"No, no. But it isn't quite right that everything should belong to one brother and nothing to the other."

"We don't know that it does," Naomi objected.

"I know," her mother replied, with simple exactness. "I managed to extract a lot from Mrs. Courteney last night, while you were enjoying yourself with Martin."

Naomi forbore to question this description of her evening. Instead, she said rather crossly, "Mrs. Courteney isn't exactly an unprejudiced source of information."

"My dear, she is their mother," replied Mrs. Thurrock, with a reverence for the maternal bond which Naomi thought a little misplaced in Mrs. Courteney's case.

"Martin's her favorite, though," she murmured, a trifle resentfully.

"I don't think we can find fault with her for that."

"Well, perhaps not. I suppose mothers often have a favorite. But the fact is, Mother, that Martin never seems to lack the means to do what he wants. When I first came here, he had just returned from a winter sports holiday. He dresses well, runs a nice car, and I must say, when he took me out, he spent very freely on me."

"Quite right too," said Mrs. Thurrock approvingly. "I like a man to be generous when he's entertaining."

"All right. But the money must come from *somewhere*. Either he is much better off in his own right than we think, or Jerome makes him an exceedingly generous allowance. In either case, I don't think you should blame Jerome."

"I wasn't blaming anyone," replied Mrs. Thurrock, not quite accurately. "And you're getting argumentative, darling, which is quite unnecessary. Now I'm going to have forty winks, and, if you take my advice, you'll do the same. Flat on the bed there's nothing more restful. And incidentally, quite a beautifier."

This, Naomi knew, was a form of dismissal. So she abandoned any further attempt to justify Jerome's every action, and retired to her own room. Having, however, no desire to lie flat on her bed, restful and beautifying though it might be, she slipped on a coat and went out for a walk, not sorry to be a little while alone.

She walked further than she had really intended, lured on by the beauty of the spring day and the awakening countryside. In a strange and moving way, it almost seemed to Naomi as though the scene mirrored her own hopes, for beauty and new life kept on breaking through, however hard the grip of winter had once been.

"Ought one to be severely practical and stifle one's hopes?" she thought. "Or should one be ever hopeful—inviting happiness and risking pain?"

Though she asked herself the questions, she knew her own answer. No one could walk through such promise of beauty and seriously think of stifling hope.

She was so much absorbed in her own thoughts that for a while she lost her way, and by the time she finally found herself back in the vicinity of Foley, it was getting quite late in the afternoon.

No one was likely to be anxious about her, but she hurried rather as she came through the garden. And that was how she almost literally ran into Martin, as he came to meet her.

"Darling, I've been looking for you everywhere!" He embraced her with a radiance and joy out of all proportion to the occasion. "Where on earth have you been?"

"I just went for a walk, and lost my way for a while." She gently disentangled herself from his embrace, and tried to look and sound very matter-of-fact. "But has something happened? You look—I don't know how you look—as though someone had left you a fortune."

"Not quite that. But near enough."

He laughed on a note of such excited joy that she glanced at him in sympathetic curiosity, for it was not possible to see anyone look so happy and remain indifferent.

"What is it, Martin?"

"Come and sit down here, while I tell you. I still can't believe it."

They walked a few steps and, obediently, she sat down on the bench he indicated. For a moment he paced up and down in front of her, as though his excitement were still too much to be borne. Then he dropped down beside her and, leaning forward, with his hands clasped between his knees, he exclaimed, "I suppose it won't be such a surprise to you as it was to me. Somehow, I never imagined Jerome doing such a thing. It's been enough that he let me take a hand here and there on the estate. I chafed a good deal at times, because every man likes some independence of his own. But I m not going to pretend that life wasn't pretty good in many ways, and he was never ungenerous with the money. But this—"

"Oh, Martin, please! I'm consumed with curiosity." Naomi laughed. "Can't you just tell me what Jerome has done?"

"He's promised to make over about a third of the estate to me. It includes a couple of farms and a wonderful site for a house. It's absolutely princely! I'll say that for old Jerome. When he does anything, he does it on a princely scale."

"But, Martin—I—I can hardly take it in. How wonderful for you, my dear." (What could her mother or anyone say *now* about one brother having all and the other nothing?) "I don't really understand. I mean—why did he do it just now?"

"He said he'd been thinking about it for some while. At least, that he'd been thinking that the present situation wasn't satisfactory. And then, I gather, you said something, you precious little angel." He leaned forward and kissed her cheek lightly.

"/ did?" Naomi looked astounded. "But I couldn't. I didn't know anything about the situation here."

"No, I know. But it wasn't specifically about the division of property. It was something you said to him in the studio last night."

"Last night?" Some terrible, premonitory chill seemed to stir the short hairs at the nape of her neck. "Oh, no, not last night. I didn't—I didn't mention you in that conversation. Not by name."

"No, maybe not. But he said you cast a flood of daylight on the situation and showed how false it was. He'd seen how things were between us, Naomi darling, and he asked you. something about marriage plans, didn't he?"

"But not—not any—specific marriage plans," Naomi gasped, in indescribable fear and dismay.

"No, I know no names were mentioned. Jerome isn't as crude as that. But he said you told him he knew the situation for himself—that it just ruled out marriage as a practical possibility. Apparently it was quite a revelation to him. But he thought it over last night and realized the only thing was to give me a place of my own—so that I could stand on my own feet and have something to offer a girl. Then, oddly enough, your mother said something to him—"

"Oh, not my Mother too!" exclaimed Naomi, in horror, and she buried her face in her hands.

"Darling, it's all right." He laughed tenderly and put his arms round her. "I'm sorry—I'm such a clumsy fool, beginning at the wrong end of the story. Of course this all adds up to the fact that I'm mad to marry you—as well you must know—and now Jerome's made it possible."

CHAPTER NINE

FOR almost a minute Naomi was perfectly still in Martin's arms, rigid with dismay, unresponsive to his eager words. Indeed she, hardly heard them. All she heard was her own voice saying to Jerome last night, "You know the situation as well as I do. Marriage just isn't a practical possibility, apart from anything else."

And she had supposed—absurdly, incredibly, as it seemed to her now—that he would take this to mean that, because of her family responsibilities, and the fact that she was pledged to work for him in return for all his generosity, she would not even think of marriage, to Martin or anyone else.

At the time it had seemed to her such a clever way of letting him know that there was nothing serious between her and Martin. The reference to her own situation had seemed to her unmistakable. She had forgotten about Martin's situation.

But Jerome had not forgotten. He had interpreted her words as a criticism of his brother's dependence on him. And, characteristically, he had righted the position with what Martin had truly called princely generosity.

"Darling—" Martin turned her to face him and looked at her with a shade of anxiety—"darling, why don't you say something? Are you just as stunned as I was at first by the incredible news?"

"Yes, I'm stunned." She spoke rather huskily, cold with the knowledge that, to Martin at least, she must make the situation quite clear, here and now.

"Martin, I'm not only stunned. I'm terribly embarrassed and—and sorry too. Because what I have to say must hurt you, I'm afraid. I

had no thought of marrying you. You say Jerome 'saw how things were between us'. But if he thought I was in love with you, he was wrong."

"He knew we couldn't either of us think of it in anything but the most general terms," Martin corrected her quite confidently. "But now I'm in a position to ask you—"

"It has nothing to *do* with your position," she insisted desperately. "I thought I'd done everything I could to show you that, though I like you immensely, I didn't want it to go further than that. I'm terribly sorry if I didn't make it any clearer. You drew too many conclusions too quickly, my dear. We haven't even known each other long and—"

"You can take your time to know me better." He laughed and kissed the side of her cheek, still refusing to believe that anything but the uncertainty of his position had held her back. "I know I seem to be rushing things. But, now that Jerome has arranged everything so wonderfully, you must see how ideal it is—how gloriously happy we should be—"

"Martin, we should *not* be happy." She spoke with a firmness which stopped even him in mid-career. "I don't love you. I'm truly sorry if you love me. But nothing so one-sided could mean real happiness for either of us."

"I'll *make* you love me," he declared.

"No, dear. Love can't be forced or commanded. It just—comes, whether one wants it or not."

He stared at her.

"How oddly you said that! Almost sadly. As though you—knew."

There was a strange silence, for there was nothing Naomi could think of to say, in answer to that. And at last he said slowly, and with conviction, "You mean that you do know? Then—there's someone else."

She was never sure afterwards if she had been moved by passionate desire to state the truth or the knowledge that here was the perfect answer to all Martin's arguments. At any rate, she replied, quietly and firmly, "Yes, Martin, there is someone else. So you see, that really does settle it, doesn't it?"

"But who—who?" His face was dark with dismay and sudden jealousy. "Good heavens, it surely isn't Jerome? It *can't* be Jerome."

For a moment she was so appalled at having her secret spoken aloud that she was dumb. But then some instinct of self-preservation brought the right words to her lips, and she heard herself say, with dignity and composure, "Martin, dear, why does it have to be anyone in this particular circle? I did have a life before I came to Foley, you know."

"You mean—" he frowned, as though resenting a past for her in which he had no place—"you mean someone I don't even know?"

Naomi bowed her head, in the childish belief that if she did not actually say the word, the declaration was something short of an actual untruth.

There was a long silence. Then Martin said heavily, "Then there's no question of your changing your mind?"

"None at all. I'm sorry, Martin. You are a dear and valued friend. But it would be no kindness to pretend you were more."

"And this other chap—You're going to marry him some time?"

"Oh, no!" She looked disproportionately startled. "There's no question of that."

"Doesn't he want you?" Martin asked, crudely because he had to know the truth.

"No."

"Then, in time, you'll get over him." Martin was suddenly hopeful again. "I don't even mind being second-best, Naomi. Thousands of happy marriages have been built on that, to begin with, and then—"

"No!" she interrupted, almost violently. "Please don't delude yourself with false hopes. If there were a kind way of refusing you, I would try to find it, because I hate hurting you. But no good has ever been achieved by being vague about these things. I wish you well from the bottom of my heart, but I will not marry you—now or any other time."

There was no gainsaying the conviction in her voice, and for a moment or two he was silent again. Then he drew away from her and looked at her with an entirely different expression. A moody, more complicated expression which made him look oddly like his brother. And what he said was, "You realize what this will mean to me, of course?"

She was shaken by the cold, flat tone.

"Martin, I know it's difficult to believe it now— but you'll get over this." Strange that she could be so wise for someone else, but not for herself. "People do get over—everything. And remember,

you'll have so much happiness in your new-found fortune. You'll—"

"What new-found fortune do you suppose there will be now?" he cut in roughly. "I daresay you're right when you say I'll get over you. It hurts now— confoundedly, but any man can get over any girl eventually, I suppose. What you have done is far more complete than personal rejection. You've successfully blasted the hopes that Jerome had raised."

"But what nonsense!" She gazed at him in anger and dismay. "That offer wasn't dependent on *my* reaction. Why should it be?"

"Because that's Jerome's way of looking at things. He saw this as the ideal was of righting the wrong Uncle Enoch had done you, I suppose."

"Nonsense! Any gift of land or money that he wants to make to you is *your* affair—*your* life."

"Then why hasn't he done anything before?" countered Martin shortly. "He's known me and my position all his life. Why should he suddenly become so generous now? except that he sees I want to get married—and to the very girl for whom he feels he ought to do something. It's the complete answer to the problem. Ties up all the ends in a way that satisfies his passion for production, which extends far beyond his actual work."

"I don't believe it!" Naomi cried distractedly. "People don't argue that way."

"Jerome does. And, if there's to be no marriage, he's perfectly capable of saying there's no reason to alter the present situation."

"He *couldn't* do such a thing!" She was appalled by the responsibility which was being thrust upon her.

"Of course he could. There's nothing Jerome wouldn't do, in his arrogant, ruthless way, if it suited him. He *likes* to push people around. It gives him a feeling of power."

"I don't believe it," Naomi repeated. She was on her feet now, white and determined. "I'll go and have it out with him now." And, before Martin could stop her, she turned and ran up the path towards the house.

She thought he called after her, even followed her a few steps, but she refused to look round. She had nothing else to say to Martin. It was to Jerome she must speak. And the singleness of this purpose took her almost on wings into the house and across the hall.

It mattered not at all that her mother appeared in the drawing room doorway and exclaimed, "Naomi, darling, I've just heard—"

"I can't wait now," Naomi cried, and ran on, up the stairs, for something told her that Jerome would be in his studio and, breathless though she now was, she never stopped running until she came in sight of the steps leading up to it.

Then, at last, she slackened her pace and paused to regain her breath. But when she did that she felt her courage ebbing in resistless waves, and she knew that she must go straight on if she were to tackle this scene at all.

She knocked on the door and entered almost before his voice bade her do so, and there she stood before him, trembling and wide-eyed, while she tried to breathe evenly.

"Naomi—" He had been sitting aimlessly at his desk when she came in, but he got up immediately— "What's the matter?"

"Jerome, it's not true, is it?—that you'll withhold your gift to Martin unless I marry him. You could not mean that. You could not put such a responsibility upon me—force me to something—"

"Sit down," he said curtly. "No one is forcing you to anything. Stop being a little fool and making a scene about nothing. Get your breath back, and then tell me what this is all about."

She dropped into the chair he pushed forward, and for a moment she put her head in her hands. Then, with a tremendous effort, she regained her self-control and looked up, to find him watching her, those bright eyes of his slightly narrowed, so that she noticed there were deep lines at the corners.

"I'm sorry." She pushed back her chair. "I didn't mean to make such a fuss. But—but things suddenly overwhelmed me. Everything seemed to be happening so terribly fast and—and not the way I wanted at all."

She paused, but he said nothing. And so, with an attempt at clarity, she went back to the beginning and said, almost calmly.

"I suppose you know Martin asked me to marry him?"

"I gathered he was going to do so," Jerome agreed drily.

"Well, I can't possibly. I don't love him. I like him. He's a dear and charming friend, but that's quite different. There's no question of my marrying him. No question at all."

"Very well. That's clear. What is the trouble?"

"This business of the—the gift of part of the estate. Martin thinks you were prompted to that by the idea that he and I wanted to get married."

"I was."

"But the gift isn't *dependent* on that, Jerome, is it?" She looked at him beseechingly. "I mean—you would have given him that anyway, as his right. Not as a sort of—of neat way of tying up the ends."

"What do you mean quite?" He looked faintly amused, though his eyes were still narrowed in that watchful way. And, as though seeking to penetrate the enigma of his thoughts, she answered him with another question.

"Jerome, what made you suddenly decide to do this for Martin?"

"It wasn't entirely sudden. I've known for some time that I should do something about him. Since the conversation we had on the first evening you were her, if you must know."

"The conversation *we* had? What conversation was that?"

"When I made you tell me what you would have done if our positions had been reversed in Uncle Enoch's will."

"What did I say?" enquired Naomi fearfully, for it seemed to her that too many of her utterances were coming home to roost with disastrous results.

"You said—I remember the exact words—'If I felt I had inherited something which, morally, belonged partly to someone else, it wouldn't even interest me whether they were nice or nasty, worthy or unworthy. They could waste the lot—or be of great benefit to

the human race. That would be *their* business. Mine would simply be whether or not they were entitled to the money.' Do you remember saying that?"

"More or less," she admitted. "Yes."

"And that's your firm conviction?"

"Well—yes, Jerome, it is."

"You were right, of course." He moved impatiently, and she wondered suddenly if he were in pain. "I suppose you can't imagine how novel—and unacceptable—such a view is to anyone as arrogant as myself."

"You're not arrogant," she exclaimed quickly.

"Well, the exact word doesn't matter, I suppose." He shrugged. "I like to move the pieces on the board—put it that way. And, in both my work and my private life, that's what I have usually been able to do. My father left things so that I was the one who made the decisions here—"

"But you were fantastically generous with what you had." Again she interrupted quickly.

"Fantastically' is a misused word," he retorted impatiently. "I was generous, if you like. But generosity can also be a symbol of power, Naomi." He made a slight grimace. "There was something so simple and unquestioning in your statement of faith in the right of personal independence. I thought a lot about it afterwards."

"Did you?" said Naomi, both touched and gratified that he should have thought about anything she had said. "And—specially in connection with Martin?"

"Yes." He nodded. "I've always thought—I still think—of Martin as a pleasant, irresponsible, lightweight creature. What you made me see was that he had a right to be that—or possibly something else—in his own way and on his own responsibility. In my arrogance, if you will permit the word—" he smiled at her—"I had supposed it was wiser for me to hold the reins at Foley, in all circumstances. I was wrong. It was as simple as that."

"And you'd been thinking this for some time?" she pressed him earnestly.

"Since you first came into our lives," was the odd way he put it.

"Then it was quite separate from this—this mistaken idea that I wanted to marry Martin?"

He stared at her moodily for a moment. Then suddenly he smiled.

"Don't you really want to marry him?" he enquired, with almost boyish curiosity.

"No."

"Funny. You gave the impression of it more than once."

"I didn't! *He* may have, but I didn't. At least, I didn't want to. You're thinking of that idiotic time when you came upon us outside the lift, aren't you?"

"Among other things," he agreed, with a mocking, glance.

"Other things?—Oh, the way he greeted me yesterday. And the time he managed to sell you the idea that I would rather go motoring with him than to London with you. You shouldn't pay so much attention to details, Jerome."

"I wasn't alone in the mistaken view," he replied amusedly. "Your mother holds it too, I believe."

"Mother?" Naomi looked faintly alarmed. "What has Mother been saying or doing?"

"Like you, she has a charming way of pointing out one's duty." An almost mischievous glint came into his eyes. "It's a different technique, but the result is the same. She and I breakfasted alone together this morning, and she pointed out to me—not obliquely, as you do, but quite directly—that it was wrong of me to keep my brother dependent on me."

"Oh, really, she is the limit!" muttered Naomi, divided between horror and amusement.

"She went on to enquire how I supposed he could possibly ask any girl to marry him", and added that she had reason to believe that I was standing in the way of your happiness as well as his."

"She didn't! I'm most terribly sorry. She does the most awful—"

"You don't need to apologize," Jerome interrupted her calmly. "I like your mother. She's the only person who has ever pitied my lameness without making me feel as though I'm being skinned."

"O-oh—" said Naomi softly.

"She's the most natural thing I've ever known." He smiled musingly. "I suppose that's where *you* get your simplicity?"

"I don't know." Naomi smiled too. "Am I so simple?"

"Not so uncomplicated as your mother. I think perhaps there's some basic secret behind those violet eyes of yours." He looked at

her with a penetration which frightened her. Then suddenly he laughed and, catching her by both her hands, drew her to her feet, so that she was quite close against him. "What is your secret, Naomi?"

"My—my secret?" she stammered. "Why, there isn't—"

"I'll tell you her secret." It was Martin's voice, which spoke from the doorway, with a brutal directness that made them move apart. "She loves someone that neither of us has ever seen. She told me as much just now. And that's why she won't marry me. *Now* what are you going to do about it, Jerome? Revoke your promised gift because Naomi won't listen to any wooing of mine?"

He came slowly forward into the room, his face dark with anxiety and resentment. And as he came it seemed to Naomi that he—or perhaps his words—had cast a shadow over the room.

For a second longer Jerome held one of her hands, more tightly than he could have realized, for his long, strong fingers hurt hers. Then he said, flatly and coldly—not at all like someone making a munificent gift, "There's no question of my revoking the gift. I shall have the deeds drawn up during the next week or two. A third of the Foley estate will be yours, whether you marry Naomi or not."

"My God—do you mean that?" The astonished radiance on Martin's face moved Naomi, in spite of her dismayed fury over his disclosure. "It will be mine? Without strings? Even if Naomi—"

"Naomi can do what she pleases with her own life," Jerome cut in coldly. "As you say, she had probably decided the general direction of it long before she met either of us. Now go along, both of you. I have work to do."

They went. There was nothing else to do. And all the way downstairs she had to hear Martin's jubilant relief and thanks, since he seemed to think that it was somehow her intervention which had confirmed Jerome's decision.

At any other time she would have been almost amused that he could rejoice so openly as a prospective landowner, when he was also supposed to be mourning as a rejected lover. But there was something so touchingly real in his passionate desire for part of Foley to *belong* to him that Naomi could not find it in her heart to blame him.

Martin, she thought with sudden acumen, would love many women in varying degrees. But the passion of his life would always be Foley.

She could forgive him very easily for taking her rejection in his stride. What she could not forgive him was the clumsy way he had thrust the supposed reason for that rejection upon Jerome.

Just as everything had seemed to be becoming simpler and easier! Just as she had finally convinced Jerome that Martin meant nothing in her life! That was the moment Martin had to choose for flinging down her own untruthful statement that she loved someone unknown to them both.

"It serves me right for telling a lie," thought Naomi wretchedly, when she had escaped at last to her own room, on the pretext of dressing for dinner. "Why did I have to say anything so idiotic—so untrue?"

But she knew very well why she had. For the very same reason as she had flatly denied to Felicity her love for Jerome. Only with that shielding lie could she protect the shrinking, secret love which no one must guess.

Even in her room she was not long in welcome solitude. Her mother came in, full of excitement and enquiry.

"Darling, you do *know* what has happened, don't you?" she began eagerly. "Martin is quite independent now. A man of property, as one might say. Only this morning, I ventured to hint to Jerome—"

"You didn't hint. You told him outright, didn't you?" put in Naomi, half reproachfully. "Mother, you shouldn't go about telling people what they ought to do with their own money."

"My dear, I shouldn't *dream* of doing such a thing," exclaimed Mrs. Thurrock, genuinely under the impression that she had conducted the breakfast conversation with the utmost tact and diplomacy. "But we spoke quite generally about—well, estates, you know, and that sort of thing. I introduced the point about Martin quite subtly. I even wondered if he had got my meaning—"

"He got your meaning all right," Naomi assured her drily. "He understood perfectly well that it was his duty to make over part of the estate to Martin, so that Martin could marry me."

"He's very quick," observed Mrs. Thurrock, in the satisfied tone of one commending a promising schoolboy.

"Very," agreed Naomi.

"Well, darling, you do see how wonderfully everything is going to work out? I shouldn't wonder if Martin proposes before the weekend is over—dear fellow," she added approvingly.

"He has already proposed."

"Already—? But, Naomi dear, how *wonderful!* Dear child, I do congrat—"

"I refused him, Mother."

"You *refused* him?" Mrs. Thurrock stared at her inexplicable child in incredulous dismay. "But, Naomi, why? You—you aren't ill, dear, are you?"

"No. I'm perfectly well and perfectly sane," Naomi stated categorically. "And I refused Martin for the simple reason that I don't love him."

"But he's a delightful fellow!" In nostalgic retrospect, Mrs. Thurrock evidently saw him as very nearly perfect. "*Anyone* would love him. It's only a question of time and—"

"Mother, don't go contrary to all your natural beliefs, just because Martin has suddenly become a catch. You married Father because you loved him, didn't you?"

"Well, of course."

"And when you were very poor and harassed, did you ever regret having done so?"

"Often," replied her mother, with devastating candor. "But never for longer than ten minutes."

"Oh, Mother!" Suddenly, Naomi hugged her and laughed. "I see what Jerome means about you."

"Where does Jerome come into this?" Her mother looked gratified, though puzzled.

"It doesn't matter. He likes you very much, but that's beside the point at the moment. I couldn't marry Martin, any more than you could have married anyone but Father. Once you'd seen him, could

you have learned to take someone else in time?" Would *that* have been 'only a question of time'?"

"No. But then I *had* seen him," stated Mrs. Thurrock simply. "With you—Oh—" She paused, and Naomi could almost see the machinery of her mind working towards the truth, with irresistible accuracy.

"Mother, don't start guessing or inventing!"

"I suppose it's Jerome," said Mrs. Thurrock, with one of those flashes of intuition of which she was unexpectedly capable.

And because Naomi simply could not lie to her mother, she just nodded.

"Yes, it's Jerome. But please don't ever say anything—or even *think* anything—about it. He doesn't know, he doesn't care for me at all, and it would embarrass and annoy him to the last degree if he suspected such a thing."

Mrs. Thurrock drew a long sigh. Naomi thought at first she was drawing a long breath, preparatory to further argument. But this was not so. "She was merely bidding goodbye to a cherished project.

All she said was, "I'm sorry, dear. Martin would have been such a good idea. But if that's the way you feel, there's nothing more to say. I suppose we ought to go down to dinner now."

So they went down to dinner and to an evening which, inevitably, involved a certain amount of strain for everyone.

For once, Naomi was almost glad to see Antonia, who came in halfway through the evening, and contributed her civilizing influence to an otherwise rather inhibited party.

"Though, to tell the truth, we're all being pretty civilized at the moment," thought Naomi, with a flash of amusement. "No one could imagine the undercurrents in this room by just looking at our polite and attentive faces."

Antonia, it seemed, was considered sufficiently intimate with the family to be told Martin's good news, and fortunately this provided plenty of conversation.

It also, Naomi felt, provided Antonia with some food for thought. Or was it just that almost any girl would now look at Martin in a different light?

At any rate, whatever the explanation, it was, unexpectedly, Martin who saw Antonia home. Though this, of course, might merely be his way of tactfully absenting himself from a gathering where his presence had become slightly embarrassing to more than one person.

The rest of the weekend was not quite so difficult, but at no time could Naomi feel at ease.

Her casually friendly relationship with Martin was gone for ever. Rejoice though he might in his new prosperity and independence, the fact was that he had failed in his hope of marrying her, and the role of rejected suitor is not an easy one for any man.

In addition, Naomi was pretty sure that Mrs. Courteney knew or guessed the situation, and it was hard for her to be cordial to any girl who could so far underestimate her favorite son.

No one was sorry when Sunday evening came. And, by general consent, it was decided that an evening departure was preferable to a very early start on Monday morning. To the end both Mrs. Thurrock and Mrs. Courteney kept up their barrage of gracious politeness. But Naomi guessed that even her mother drew a sigh of relief when, at last, the car slid down the drive, passed the gatehouse of Foley and turned out into the road to London.

Mrs. Thurrock was not so talkative on the way back as she had been on the journey down, and for this Naomi was thankful. For, dearly though she loved her mother, she was nervous of her proximity to Jerome, now that she knew the true situation.

Only once did Mrs. Thurrock come anywhere near dangerous ground, and that was when she said, after a long and thoughtful silence.

"I suppose that good-looking girl, Antonia Vayne, will marry Martin now."

"Oh, Mother—" began Naomi from the back seat, and she glanced fearfully at Jerome's impassive profile.

But all he said was, "What makes you think that, Mrs. Thurrock?"

"Well, he's her *type*, I think. Only she isn't the kind to take anyone who isn't nicely endowed with this world's goods. I imagine she saw him with rather different eyes last night."

"Aren't you being a bit hard on her?"

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Thurrock looked quite surprised. "I'm sure she's a very nice girl. But she's also no fool, and she probably knows she isn't cut out to be a poor man's wife. That's the case with lots of girls."

One can either take poverty or one can't. I should know," she added, without rancor.

"And what about Martin?" enquired Jerome drily. "There's his choice in the matter too, surely?"

"A little," conceded Mrs. Thurrock. "But not much. That's the difference between you and him. Almost any nice, suitable, determined girl could get Martin. I don't think—" she glanced reflectively at Jerome—"that any girl could get you unless you meant her to."

"You relieve my mind," said Jerome. But he laughed a good deal, and Naomi dared to hope that he had taken the whole conversation very lightly.

Back at the familiar block of flats, they both bade Jerome goodnight, with expressions of thanks which implied there had not been one uneasy moment during the whole weekend. But, when at last they closed the front door of their own flat behind them, Mrs. Thurrock exclaimed, "How nice to be home! I'm so glad to have seen Foley, of course, and it was a charming and interesting visit. But rather *wearing*, somehow."

A verdict with which Naomi found herself in almost passionate agreement.

During the next week or two, life went on in a surprisingly uneventful way. The first night of "Till Tomorrow" was rapidly approaching which involved an increasing amount of work and an increasing degree of strain on nerves and tempers. But Naomi found herself taking it all in her stride, in a way which sometimes surprised even herself.

The work absorbed and delighted her continually. Problems and difficulties there were, from time to time, of course. But none which she found insoluble, and always Jerome proved himself a brilliant and patient instructor, however variable his temper might be on other matters.

Indeed, Naomi had come to regard the theatre so much as her natural milieu that she was astonished when, one less busy afternoon, Jerome suddenly pushed away the work which lay in front of him on his desk, looked across at her and said, "I suppose it's about time we discussed your future, in more permanent terms. You've been here a month now, Naomi. How are you liking it?"

"Why, I love it, of course! Hadn't I made that clear? I—I only hope you're as satisfied on your side," she added a trifle anxiously.

"I'm completely satisfied," he stated, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Then you're prepared to continue?"

"Of course."

"Indefinitely?"

"Why, certainly, Jerome. Why should you think otherwise?" She was faintly disturbed at his insistence.

"Because of what Martin said." He frowned.

"What on earth did Martin say about me or my work?"

"Nothing about your work." He brushed that aside impatiently. "And of course your private life, as such, is no business of mine." His brusque indifference could not have been more obvious. "But where it affects the possible duration of your association with me,

I have to have things clear. What was that about your being engaged to some fellow before ever you came to Foley?"

"I—I wasn't engaged," stammered Naomi. "I never said I was. Nor did Martin, so far as I remember."

"Well, the exact wording doesn't matter." Again the tone of brusque indifference made it difficult not to wince. "But the last time we touched on your private affairs, we managed to get into a pretty tangle. This time I should like things quite clear, before I plan any future work together. Just what is the situation between you and this man?"

CHAPTER TEN

FOR a moment, the danger and the irony of the situation overwhelmed Naomi. Here she was, before the man she loved, and, for her own safety, she must try to convince him that she loved someone who did not exist.

She took a deep breath and said huskily, "I don't really want to talk about it. But I—I do see your point about needing to be reassured on the question of my staying here. Will it do if I *assure* you there's no likelihood of my marrying for—for quite a long time?"

"It's to be a long engagement, eh?"

"There—there isn't any engagement, as I told you before."

"Well, then—" he frowned. Then he exclaimed suddenly, as though it were really his business, "Look here, Naomi, you're not making a fool of yourself with a married man, are you?"

"Oh, no!" On this at least she could be fervently genuine. "It's just—one of those things. No girl likes to admit it, but—I suppose the truth is that I'm a great deal fonder of him than he is of me."

"Then drop him," he advised curtly. "There's no future in that sort of situation. Besides," Jerome added contemptuously, "the man must be a fool."

"Why?" asked Naomi.

"Draw the flattering implication for yourself," he retorted disagreeably, "and don't fish for compliments. It doesn't become you."

She had not had any intention of fishing for compliments. It was simply that she was so desperately anxious to know just what was in his mind. And his rebuke made her flush and look unhappy.

There was an awkward little silence. Then he said shortly, "Whether this man changes his mind or not, can I have your assurance that you will stay with me for a year?"

"Yes, indeed!" She looked up eagerly, relieved beyond measure to have at least this period made secure for her.

"And I want no going back on that, mind."

"There'll be no going back."

"Even if he comes to his senses and suddenly wants to marry you the next week?"

"Even then," she assured him with a pale little smile.

"Very well. I suppose that will do." But he still looked oddly dissatisfied as he went back to his work.

The afternoon wore on but, because there was a great deal to do, Naomi hardly noticed the passage of time. And even when Jerome stood up to go she was still hard at work.

"Will you be much longer?" He slammed a couple of drawers in his desk.

"No. Half an hour, perhaps."

"All right." He shrugged on his coat, bade her goodnight and went, leaving behind not only the sense of emptiness which his departure always meant for her but a profound silence.

Miss Hersey had left some time ago and there was no one else in that part of the building. No one else in the building at all, Naomi thought, except Bill, on duty at the stage door, and perhaps one or two workmen and electricians.

But she was not nervous. And, even when she found that she had left a vital notebook on the stage, earlier that day, she had no qualms about going down to the dark, cavernous stage and empty auditorium.

It took her a minute or two to find the book, which had dropped down behind a piece of scenery. But she found it in the end, and then, just as she turned to put out the solitary light and go again, there was the strange, hoarse sound of someone giving a sort of groan.

For a moment Naomi really did feel a nasty chill sensation down her back. But then the sound was repeated, and it was so unmistakably a note of human distress that she called out sharply, "What is it? Where are you?"

No intelligible sound was forthcoming. But, after a moment, the groan came again, and she realized that, incredibly, it was from overhead—in fact, from the small platform where the special sidelight had been installed.

"All right, I'm coming!" Naomi called. And, dropping her notebook, she ran to the ladder and began to ascend, as rapidly as she could.

It was not easy, and for the first few moments, she experienced some faint shadow of the hideous fear which Jerome had so obviously suffered when he ascended and descended the same ladder. But the emergency of the moment kept her from dwelling

too much on the horrible drop below, and at last she reached the top and scrambled on to the frighteningly small platform.

The lamp was out, and the man lying there was evidently half unconscious. But, as she reached him and realized that he was the electrician with whom Jerome had had so much trouble, he muttered, ' 'Careful—lamp defective—shock—'

Then he lapsed into complete unconsciousness, with a sagging movement which took him so near to the edge of the platform that only by grasping his clothes with both hands could Naomi feel that she had him in any degree of safety.

This, of course, left her unable to hold on to anything herself. And, at the realization of her own shaky position, Naomi felt the saliva dry in her mouth with terror.

She looked down only once—and almost by accident—into the great void below. But the one glimpse made her feel so sick that she hastily glanced away again, at the man she was holding.

He looked a queer, muddy grey—and horribly, horribly helpless.

"Oh, God, do help me," she said aloud, beseechingly. "I can't hold him very long." And, spurred on by the terror of the moment, she cried, "Help, help, help!" into the dreadful empty vastness of the theatre.

A teasing little echo of her own thin, frightened voice was all that answered her. And somehow, the very thought of that puny sound wafting about helplessly in space served only to heighten her awareness of her own dreadful insecurity.

The strain on her fingers and wrists was already intense, but, by bracing her feet against a strut, she managed to get a slightly better

purchase on the inert, silent man who now seemed to be her only companion in an otherwise empty world.

She told herself that she could not keep this up indefinitely, that she could not just wait there, under this fearful strain, until someone came. On the other hand, the moment she dared to loosen her hold on the helpless man, he tended to roll away from her.

"If I could shift him—" again she was speaking aloud—"If I could just shift him a little bit further this way."

She tried to do so, but almost lost her own balance in the process, and regained her position only with a jerk which made her let out a moan of pure terror.

"Hold on," she told herself, determinedly thrusting back the nausea which now threatened to engulf her. "You've just got to hold on. Someone *must* come eventually. Bill—or the watchman or *someone*."

But the thought of this ghastly vigil extending for some hideous unmeasured period of time was so appalling that again she cried, "Help—help—oh, please, someone, help."

And, like an answer to all the confused prayers which had been coursing through her mind, there was suddenly the blessed, blessed sound of footsteps.

The relief was so intense—so almost agonizing—that she never noticed the characteristic unevenness of the step, only the wonderful fact that help was near. And it was not until someone called sharply from below, "Naomi—?" that she realized it was Jerome.

"In God's name, child, what are you doing up there?" His voice sounded harsh with fear and anger.

"There's been an accident. The lights man is hurt. I can't hold him much longer, Hurry, Jerome, hurry. Or we'll *both* fall," she added, with a sob.

She meant that he was to hurry and fetch help. But he must have taken it differently, for in a second she heard him coming up the ladder.

"No, no. Not you," she cried, even then. "It's so terrible for you—"

"Shut up!" was what Jerome said, in a tone that was like a slap in the face. "And stop being hysterical."

"I—I'm not—" She was trying desperately not to cry, with mingled strain and relief. And then his head rose above the level of the platform, and she saw his face was white and grim, but not gleaming with sweat, as on that other horrible occasion.

She started to explain, but he evidently took in the situation at a glance.

"Was it the lamp?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Just a moment, while I get hold of him."

"Jerome, you can't possibly carry him down! He's a dead weight. It'll take two men at least."

"I know. But you can't hold him any longer. I'll hold him while you go for help. And *don't argue!*" he shouted at her, as she began to protest.

"All right," she whispered. "Have you got him securely?"

"Yes."

Cautiously, she transferred the whole weight to Jerome's strong, beautiful hands. Hands that were so much more powerful than hers—so much more secure, if only his nerve held.

"Be quick," he said, as she moved cautiously over to the ladder, "but be careful, my darling. Hold tightly to the ladder, because your hands will be weak and tired."

"I'll be careful," she promised, as she began the descent. And although her knees quivered and her hands felt flabby and lifeless, somehow she clung on, because he had called her his darling and given her fresh strength.

At the bottom of the ladder, she felt she must surely collapse on the ground. But somehow she forced her trembling legs to carry her as, stumbling and gasping, she ran in search of help.

She called out as she ran, and suddenly, to her immeasurable relief, the stalwart form of Bill reared up in front of her.

"Here, what's the matter, what's the matter?" He caught hold of her as she stumbled afresh.

"There's been an accident. One of the lights men. On the high platform. Mr. Fennell's holding him, but it will take two men to get him down. Hurry—please hurry!"

"Sam! Jack!" bawled Bill in stentorian tones, and, as though by magic, a couple of workmen appeared at the end of the narrow passage.

She heard Bill call a few words of explanation over his shoulder as he ran off towards the stage, and the other two men shouldered past her and pounded after him. She tried to follow them, feeling her way along the wall as she went, because, now that there was no urgent reason to keep upright, it seemed almost impossible not to sink on the ground.

"Jerome," she whispered, "I'm coming—I'm coming, dear."

But the passage stretched for miles and miles in front of her. Then it tipped up, so that to walk along it was like climbing a hill. And, in the certain knowledge that she would never get back to Jerome, she gave one protesting little sob and slid to the ground.

It seemed to her that she lay there for a long while. Then she was vaguely aware of several people around her and someone lifted her up. Someone who said fiercely, "No—I'll take her."

In the distance there was a long, urgent ringing of a bell.

"Jerome," she whispered again. "I'm coming."

"All right, darling—I have you."

She knew it was Jerome who answered her. So it must have been he who also kissed her, on her cheeks, and her lips and her hair. And then she was, incredibly, sitting in a chair in the office, and he was sitting on the arm of it, trying to make her drink something.

Whatever it was burnt her throat and made her cough. But it also brought her nearer to reality.

"Oh, Jerome—" she touched him, as though she could hardly believe his presence—"you're safe!"

"Lord, yes, I'm all right, child." He passed his arm round her and drew her close. "Don't worry about anything."

It seemed good advice, when she was leaning against him in such delicious and close proximity. So she was silent for a moment. Then she asked wonderingly, "Did I—dream it?"

"No, I'm afraid you didn't. But they've got Hemming safely away to hospital now, You saved him by hanging on. Otherwise he would have fallen and been killed."

"You saved him too."

"I only took over for a few minutes."

"But they were very long minutes, weren't they?" And, without quite realizing what she was doing, she put up her hand tenderly against his cheek.

"Very long," he said. And, turning his head, he kissed the palm of her hand. "But the longest minutes were while you were going down that ladder."

"Because I was leaving you alone?"

"No. Because I was afraid you might not have the strength to hold on. If you'd fallen—" He stopped, and she actually felt him shudder.

"But didn't you think—if *you* had fallen—?"

"No," he said slowly, "I never thought of that. My fear for you just blotted that out. Then, when I knew you were safe, the relief was so enormous that again I could think of nothing else. And, after that—they came and took Hemming away, and it was only when I had to get down that I felt afraid for myself again."

"I know. I tried to get to you. But I think I fainted or something."

"What more did you think you could do if you did get to me?" he asked, stroking her hair.

"I thought it might just—help, if I were there."

"Oh, God—you darling!" he said, and she felt his lips against her cheek again.

For a moment she was still, wordless with the rapture of something beyond her wildest dreams. Then she said quietly, "When I asked if I had dreamt it, I didn't mean the awful business in the theatre. I meant—did I dream that you kissed me, as you carried me into the office?"

"No, you didn't dream it. I kissed you."

"Several times?"

"Several times," he agreed.

"Jerome—why?"

"Why?" He laughed. "Because I adore you. Because your dear, pale, still little face was the most precious thing in the world to me at that moment. And I thought that if I couldn't make you open those wonderful eyes of yours, I might just as well have fallen from that damned platform and made an end of it."

"Jerome! Don't say such awful things!—I mean about falling. You can say—the other—about adoring me—if it's true."

"It's true," he assured her almost grimly. "I'm sorry about the other fellow—"

"What other fellow?"

"The one you're in love with."

"I'm not in love with anyone but you!"

"You're—?" He turned her almost roughly to face him, "Say that again."

"I'm not in love with anyone but you," she repeated steadily. "I never have been."

"Then what did you mean by tormenting me with tales of some fool who didn't appreciate you?"

"I didn't mean to torment you," she said humbly. "I just had to say something to conceal from Martin that I loved you. And then I thought I had to conceal it from you too—"

"Why?"

"Well, you don't go advertising to a man that you—you love him. And Felicity said you loathed that sort of thing."

"*Felicity*? God in heaven, did you have to go to Felicity to enquire about my probable reactions?"

"No, no, Jerome. She told me without my enquiring," Naomi said, with a small, pale smile. "Please don't be cross with me, because—"

"I'm not cross with you," he said, in quite a different tone. And he took her face between his hands and looked at her with such love and tenderness that she felt the tears come into her eyes. "I'll try to be gentle with you always. Only—love me, Naomi, for I've loved you almost since I've known you, and I don't know what I'm to do if you won't share your life with me."

"You don't have to wonder what you'd do, my darling." She put her arms round his neck and kissed him. "Because I'll be there—always."

"I've never done anything to deserve you," he said, and no one seeing Jerome Fennell at that moment could have called him arrogant. "But I'll try for the rest of my life to do so."

She laughed and leant a little away from him, so that she could look into his face.

"There's just one snag," she warned him mischievously.

"What, for heaven's sake?" A look of faint alarm came into those bright, narrowed eyes.

"I have a rather dictatorial employer who made me promise, only this afternoon, that in no circumstances would I marry for at least a year."

"Leave him to me. I'll settle him," Jerome promised her gaily. "Do you feel well enough now to let me take you home?"

"Yes, of course." She glanced at the clock. "Mother will wonder what on earth I'm doing."

"She'll approve when she hears," he declared amusedly.

And then they went out together, past the sympathetic and approving Bill, who came out of his cubbyhole to say that Miss Thurrock was quite the heroine. Jerome settled her so tenderly in the car that Bill, who was not an imaginative man, told his wife later that night that he wouldn't be surprised if there was a bit about Mr. Fennell and Miss Thurrock in the papers soon. And they drove away from the theatre.

Neither said much on the way home. All which needed saying had already been said. Only, when they arrived at the flats, he asked, "May I come up with you?"

"Why, of course!"

"I thought you might want to tell your mother first."

"Oh, no. We may not even have to tell her. It's probably written all over us," Naomi said philosophically.

He laughed protestingly at that. But when they entered the flat and presented themselves before Mrs. Thurrock, she exclaimed, "Where on earth have you been Naomi?" And then—"Oh! What have you two been doing?"

"Don't make it sound like an error, Mrs. Thurrock." Jerome stood smiling down at her. "I made a great discovery today."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Thurrock looked at him doubtfully. "And what was that?"

"I realized that the only woman in the world I could bear to -have as a mother-in-law was you," Jerome said. And bending his head, he kissed her lightly on her cheek.

"Oh, my *dear I* What a charming way of putting it!" She was so enchanted that she actually embraced Jerome before her own child. But then Naomi came in for her full share of kisses and congratulations too, and for a few minutes they all talked and laughed together, with the half sentences and exclamations which come to very happy people.

Then, on the pretext that she must really get something in which to drink their health, Mrs. Thurrock went out of the room and left Naomi and Jerome together.

In a second, he had her in his arms, so tightly that she gasped and laughed a little.

"Haven't you kissed me enough?" she asked teasingly.

"No. I feel I've wasted too many years when I didn't know you," he replied. "But at least I loved you the first day I saw you."

"Oh, Jerome, you didn't! You were perfectly horrible to me. Don't you remember? Accusing me of coming to Foley to get my share—or more than my share—of Uncle Enoch's fortune."

"Yes, I remember. But there's something else I remember, too," he said slowly. "I remember your telling me that the old rogue left you fifty pounds and a revolting bit of good advice. And you laughed as you told me. You *laughed!* I thought it was the loveliest, gayest, most courageous sound I had ever heard, and from that moment I began to love you."

"Did you, really?" She looked amused and touched, and faintly mystified. "But it was rather funny, you know. It was a funny sort of will altogether when you come to think of it."

"It was the wisest will that any man ever made," he retorted, "for it brought you to me." And, drawing her once more into, his arms, he kissed her with the promise of all the years of happiness ahead.